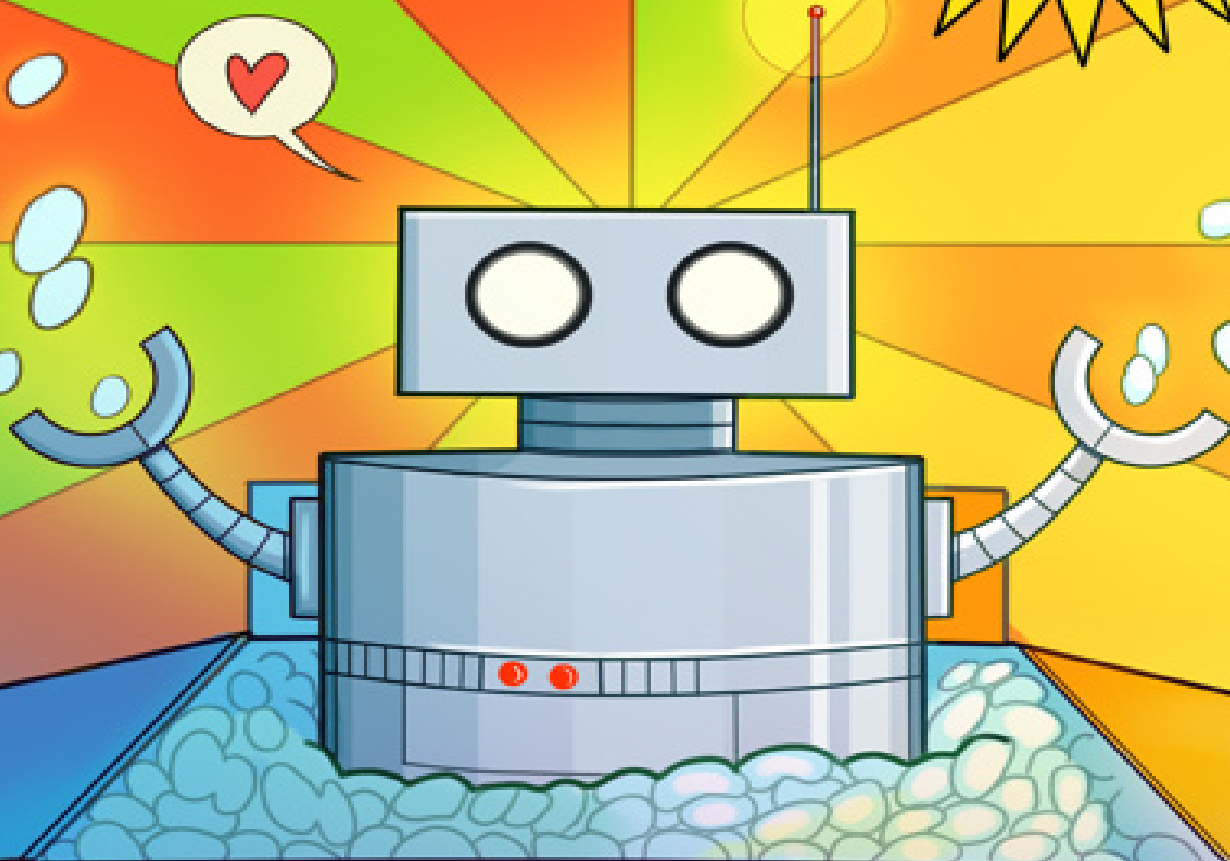


THE LOST WORLDS OF POWER

With a Foreword by H. Z. Eleven

Special
Volume #0!
A Groupees
exclusive.



Stunning novelizations of the five most
popular video games of all time!

This special volume is a Groupees exclusive, featuring five unique stories. Visit www.noiselesschatter.com for the main (and free) volume of twelve stories to be released later this year. Thank you sincerely for your support, for your interest, and for your encouragement. We hope you enjoy reading this as much as we've enjoyed putting it together.

- PJR

THE LOST WORLDS OF POWER

Special Volume #0

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

I would like to take this opportunity not to thank you for purchasing this book (it is you who should be thanking me), but to impress upon you the significance of what you are about to read.

The story of how I came into possession of these manuscripts will be related in the main *LOST WORLDS OF POWER* volume to be released later this year. However, an opportunity presented itself to make five of these important literary discoveries available early, and exclusively, in this unique printing.

In the early 1990s my grandfather stumbled upon an idea that is unrivaled to this day for sheer artistic brilliance. His idea, in a word, was to commission novelizations of the most popular video games in the world, so that he could print them and sell them to children.

Ten of these books were released before my grandfather holed himself up in a New England cabin, surrounded by the piles of pocket change he had successfully liberated from this nation's youth, and also jars of urine. Upon the discovery of his death, a long-held family suspicion was confirmed: Grandfather may have stopped publishing these adaptations, but he never stopped commissioning them.

Some might call it obsession. Some might call it passion. I call it admirable and unwavering dedication to the elevation of the arts in this country. Mine is probably right.

I encourage you to read these stories, and find yourself bettered as a result. Through them, my grandfather lives on. (Not literally.)

The full *LOST WORLDS OF POWER* collection will be available in a few months, but I could not bear to keep

the world in darkness any longer. Enjoy these five stories, which I know you will agree represent all five of the most important literary discoveries of the past two thousand years.

Wishes,

H. Z. Eleven



MARIO IS MISSING!

by R J Burgess

Mario “Jumpman” Mario was proud of the fact that he was always in demand.

For as long as the portly plumber could remember, people from all over the world looked to him to solve their problems. One glance at his trademark moustache, his blue dungarees and red shirt with its matching M-emblazoned cap and people knew that everything was going to be okay.

Mario was here and Mario was awesome. Mario could fix anything.

It was a reputation that Mario had spent a lifetime forging for himself. He had earned that reputation. Sweat blood for it. It was a reputation he could live by.

If only the same could be said for his brother...

Mario stood in his office as he had for the past hour, hands clasped behind him as he stared up at the wall behind his desk. A clock ticked loudly on the wall beside him. He ignored it.

The wall in front of him was a giant mosaic of framed certificates and awards that Mario had collected over the years. There were certificates there for everything from acts of heroism to sporting achievements; genuine qualifications declaring him a doctor, a carpenter, a demolition expert and a plumber; cut-outs from magazines that declared him more recognisable than Mickey Mouse; and signed photographs from all the people he had saved over the years.

Above them all, the charter of the Mushroom Kingdom hung proudly, officially announcing that—following Mario’s glorious rescue of Princess Toadstool from the nefarious clutches of King Bowser Koopa—the Mushroom Kingdom’s armies were henceforth entirely disbanded, leaving Mario (and his brother Luigi, pending availability) the sole defenders of the land.

It was a charter that Mario took extremely seriously. It seemed as though Mario took almost everything seriously these days.

Luigi sat in front of Mario's desk as he had for the last ten minutes, his green L-emblazoned cap in his hands as he peered nervously at Mario's back and wondered when the shouting was going to begin. Mario had sounded pretty angry when he called him into his office a short time ago and Luigi felt he had a pretty good idea why.

"I-I'm sorry, bro," he stammered at Mario's back. "I know I should have told you about this sooner. I-I know I...well, I never meant it to happen really but it's just that you were gone and..."

Mario turned around; one look at his brother's eyes and all of Luigi's excuses died in his throat.

"Last-a month, I went-a missing," Mario said. As always, he brother spoke in that weird pseudo-Italian accent he had been practicing for months in front of the bathroom mirror. Just like every aspect of Mario's appearance these days, it was a carefully crafted thing, designed to be instantly recognisable all over the world and as much a part of him now as his red cap and jumping ability.

Luigi nodded glumly. Yes, his brother had gone missing a month ago—captured by Bowser. That was when it had all started...

"I was-a captured by-a Bowser and-a held for a month-a! A month-a, Luigi, can you-a believe it?"

Luigi slid lower in his chair. He stared sullenly at the wall behind Mario's back as though it were suddenly the most interesting thing in the whole world and tried not to think about what he had been doing for most of that month.

"Remind-a me where you were while I was-a gone?" Mario pressed.

Oh great spaghetti monster! Luigi buried his head in his hands.

"Mario, I'm sorry!" he wailed. "I never meant to..."

"That's-a right! You were-a no where! Taking-a the piss!"

"The Princess came to me and said you were missing. She was crying and I..."

"You-a went on holiday!" Mario finished as he wrenched open the top drawer of his desk and dumped its contents in front of Luigi. A cheap holiday camera and a stack of photographs; Luigi recognised both at once. They were his.

He frowned up at his brother. Luigi wasn't the handiest wrench in the box at the best of times, but he had the distinct impression that he and his brother weren't exactly talking about the same thing. "I, uh I don't understand."

"Of course-a you don't! You know-a, when I first-a found out you had-a taken a camera with you on your-a quest to rescue-a me, I was-a impressed. It seemed like a good-a way to do-a reconnaissance and-a the like. But imagine my-a surprise when I got the pictures back from-a the developer and found-a this instead.

"New York!" he spat, jabbing an accusatory finger down at a picture of Luigi standing in front of the Statue of Liberty. He leaned across it, his eyes burrowing into Luigi's. "New York!" he repeated and Luigi flinched as his brother picked up the picture and threw it across the desk towards him.

"Tokyo! London! Cairo!" he shouted as other pictures followed, pin-wheeling through the air in Luigi's direction. "Did-a you honestly think I would-a be in-a Egypt? Did you-a forget the way to Bowser's lair or-a something?"

"Yes! Well, of course no but...it was just a brief diversion! You were gone so suddenly, I didn't know what to do! And I had all this money saved so I thought—well, really it was the Princess's idea—we thought why not visit a few places around the world on the way?"

"Hmm, let me-a think. May-a-be because your-a brother was in-a captivity!" Mario exploded, waving his

hands above his head as though he were conducting some huge invisible orchestra that only he could see.

"But we had to do it, you see, because it turned out that the koopas had stolen all these famous landmarks!" Luigi explained.

He had no idea why Mario was making such a big deal out of this as, from where he was standing, it was like trying to complain about the colour of wallpaper while the room itself was on fire.

"I had to run around the world trying to find all these different things they'd stolen and put them back in the right place. But first, of course, I had to work out where in the world I actually was, so I asked all the locals if they could tell me. They just gave me a bunch of cryptic clues that weren't much use on their own, but, luckily, when I added them all together I was able to figure out where I was and then summon Yoshi to my location..."

"Yoshi?" Mario repeated, deadpan.

"Yes."

"The dinosaur?"

"Yes."

"Running around-a New York City?"

"That's right! And with his help I was able to move on to the next part of the world!"

Mario facepalmed. "I could-a kill you right now, Luigi. Honestly! Do you know what I-a went through while I was in-a that jail? Bowser kept-a mocking me. 'Oh Mario, your brother is-a never coming to get-a you!' The food was-a terrible! The cell was-a nothing more than stone and-a steel bars! But I-a kept my faith, little brother. I-a said to myself, 'My brother Luigi will come-a get me!'"

"And I did!" Luigi said, but Mario wasn't through talking.

He pointed at the Mushroom Kingdom charter hanging proudly on the wall behind him. "Do you-a know what I-a went through to rescue the Princess that first time? Eight-a

worlds—each harder than-a the last! Impossible-a jumps. Enemies. Powerups. Bottomless-a pits and castles filled with-a lava. That was an achiev-a-ment! This!” The remainder of the photographs joined the others on the floor around Luigi’s feet. “This is a holiday!”

“But it was educational!” Luigi protested.

Mario threw his hands up in exasperation. “It’s like-a talking to a child. Do you-a know what I-a did yesterday? A five-hour shift down at-a the hospital! I had-a to line up all-a these coloured pills in the correct order to kill-a the germs. Did you-a help?”

“No,” Luigi admitted. “I’m not a doctor.”

Mario ignored him. “After-a this, it was straight down to the golf-a course for a quick 12 holes before seeing the lawyers about-a this whole PETA fiasco.” Luigi nodded knowingly. Apparently some animal rights activists weren’t taking too kindly to the way Mario had been treating animals lately, but as he kept pointing out to his attorney, it wasn’t his fault that the secret to short-term flight was to attach a dead raccoon to your backside.

“After that, I-a umpired a boxing match. Little Mac vs. Mr-a Dream. It was-a the match of the century!”

“I helped you with the plumbing!” Luigi pointed out, trying desperately to salvage some tiny shred of credibility in his brother’s eyes. “When all those crabs and turtles were infesting the sewers. We cleaned those out together!”

Mario ignored that too. “Finally—after all-a that—I went to-a bed only to-a find I couldn’t even rest in-a my own sleep! My-a dream was invaded by this evil monster who was allergic to-a vegetables, and a transgender purple dinosaur with a bow on his head!”

“I looked after the Princess,” Luigi mumbled. He knew it didn’t sound like much to his brother, but it was important to him. “I helped her out. Made her happy.”

Mario scowled. “Are you even-a listening to me, Luigi? You are-a not an entertainer! You are-a Mario! Mama Mia.

Sometimes I-a wonder if you really are-a my brother!"

Luigi stared, thunderstruck. The words hung in the air between them like a smelly fart that no one wants to own up to. Mario just looked away, his arms folded, his expression set into one that clearly said, "That's right, you heard me. I stand by what I said."

Luigi tried to say something, but the power of speech seemed to have deserted him. All he could manage was a weak gurgling sound in the back of his throat. Somehow he turned that gurgling into words. "We're the Mario Brothers..."

"Are we?" said Mario coldly. "Sometimes I wonder if we really did come from the same stork."

Luigi had no idea what to say. Fortunately, he was saved from having to think of an answer by the arrival of Princess Peach.

The Mushroom Kingdom's *de facto* ruler poked her head around the door to Mario's office, saw the two of them sitting there and then quickly disappeared again. A moment later, there was a polite knock on the door.

Mario sighed. "Come in, Princess."

The Princess opened the door and stepped inside. "See, I remembered this time!" she said, clearly delighted with herself.

"So you-a did," Mario said.

Mario hated it when people barged into his office without knocking first. He must have told the Princess about it a thousand times by now but, unfortunately for him, the Princess never quite managed to grasp the concept. After all, when you preside over an entire kingdom and everyone you meet is one of your subjects, the idea of personal property kind of becomes a moot point.

Still, she was definitely looking pretty today, Luigi noted as she glided sedately over to the desk and smiled down at them both. He would even go as far as saying she

looked radiant. All pink dress and golden hair, and a face so innocent it was like looking at a puppy.

Her golden crown balanced precariously on top of her head but somehow it didn't so much as wobble as she turned to look at them both and asked if she was interrupting.

"It's-a OK, Princess," said Mario, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Luigi and I were-a just finishing."

"Oh, good!" said Princess Peach, though she looked a little confused by his tone. As with the whole personal space thing, the concept of needing to make an appointment was one she also never mastered. "So anyway, I will make this brief," she said and then cleared her throat importantly. "Mario, I want to officially welcome you back to the Mushroom Kingdom after your time away!"

Her voice was so musical she practically sang the words.

"As a token of celebration, the Toads and I have a big surprise in store for you!"

Luigi wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been listening for it, but he couldn't help but hear a soft moan of dread escape from his brother's lips in that moment. "It's not a cake is it?" he said.

"It is cake!" the Princess announced happily.

"Oh good," said Mario, one hand going unconsciously to his waistline, which Luigi noticed had grown a lot lately. "But really, I-a couldn't."

"Sure you can!" said Luigi. "You deserve it, what with all the awards and whatnot. You do have the word 'super' in front of your name for a reason, after all."

"It's in the Great Hall right now!" piped Toad, the Mushroom Kingdom's tiny retainer, who had been hiding behind the Princess's dress. His oversized polka dot head wobbled like a plate of blancmange permanently on the point of collapse. "It's all chocolate and cream in seven

layers and icing and candles and a little version of you on the top made out of marzipan, come see!" squeaked Toad.

"Hush, Toad," said the Princess. She pressed a hand on top of his head to calm him, but it was like trying to calm a washing machine in full spin-cycle. "Why don't you run along with Mario and I'll be with you shortly? You can light the candles for him if you like."

"Yay!" shouted Toad, who liked nothing more in life than setting fire to things.

Toad grabbed Mario by the hand and dragged him out of the office, Mario's words of protest lost in the wake of his cheering.

The Princess waited until she was certain they were completely alone, then she knelt calmly before him and picked up one of the photographs from the floor.

"I took this one of you, didn't I?" she said, pointing to the picture of Luigi standing in front of the Statue of Liberty. "Right after we went to that sushi restaurant."

"Right before we kissed," Luigi replied. He continued to stare at the floor as the Princess gathered up the rest of the photographs and put them neatly back on the desk. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

Luigi said. "You told me you would."

The Princess blushed. If there was one thing she hated more than being forced to listen to other people's silly concepts of property and time, it was being told that she should have done something she hadn't.

"He's your brother," she countered.

"He's your boyfriend."

"I just haven't been able to find the right time," she said. "Mario's always so busy."

"Of course he is!" Luigi said. "And that's the problem, isn't it? He's never around for you! He's always off doing something or fixing something. The only time he even remembers you exist is when he's rescuing you from danger! Don't you remember? That's why you came to me

that day when we found out he was missing. That's why you were crying that night—begging me to help!”

“Stop it,” she said in a quiet voice.

“You were lonely. Sad! You know I can rescue you from that! Surely, that's the kind of hero you need.”

“Mario's back now,” the Princess replied. “I'm sorry, Luigi, but I made my choice long ago and I'm not the sort of girl to change her mind.”

She held up a hand to stop Luigi from interrupting her and admitted, “Yes, our holiday together was...fun. The weeks traveling around the world with you...I won't deny, I felt happier than I have in years. But, well...he's Mario. And you're...Luigi. I'm sorry.”

A single kiss on the nose and Princess Peach was gone, leaving just as quietly and unannounced as she had arrived. Luigi stared down at the photographs clasped in his hands.

A single tear rolled down his nose.

The phone rang, Luigi snatched it up. “It's-a me, Mario!” he said, putting on his best impression of his brother. “What's-a that? You want-a me to go-a karting with you? And play-a tennis? And some-a party games afterwards?” He pulled open Mario's diary and stared down at the messy scrawl of appointments squeezed into each day. Say one thing for Mario, he definitely liked to keep himself busy.

Several dates were circled as important. Princess Peach's birthday was one. Movie night with Peach was another.

Luigi picked up an eraser and scrubbed out his brother's handwriting before marking in the new appointments he'd just made.

“Karting and-a tennis. Sure, why-a not! This-a weekend? Great-a! See you-a there!”

Luigi hung up, a smile already stretching its way across his face. He could picture the Princess's tears now. Could imagine her coming to him, sobbing as he held her in

his arms and told her that it wasn't her fault, Mario has always been like this. He would have a present for her, of course—Luigi would never forget such an important date as her birthday. And Mario? Who cares, he's never even around anyway. What he doesn't know won't hurt him.

After all, Luigi reasoned as he closed the diary and sat back, his legs crossed before him on the desk, everyone knew that Mario "Jumpman" Mario was proud of the fact that he was always in demand.

Luigi, on the other hand, had always been content with biding his time.



BALLOON FIGHT

by Lucas Hale

“Watch out, Kid!”

Kid looked up from his work to see his brother Peto flying through the air directly at him. Kid then used all of his strength to pull himself up, using the roof of the car in front of him. As he let go he activated his puffer thruster and rose higher.

But it was too late. He couldn't avoid Peto entirely and Kid's left boot clipped the edge of one of Peto's balloons, causing it to pop. Peto slowly sank to the ground as Kid flew over the car.

“Be careful boys!” A deep voice called from across the shop.

“Sorry dad,” both Kid and Peto called out.

Kid let himself drop to the ground then walked over to check on his brother. Their father also crossed the room to join the two boys.

Their father was a tall man with short black hair and a friendly face. He was a well-respected car designer who built custom cars for wealthy customers. Due to his job, everyone besides his two children called him Chief.

Despite being angry, love still shone through his eyes as he looked down at his two sons. Both boys were roughly the same height, with Kid slightly taller than the younger Peto. They had very similar features, with the only significant difference between the two being that Kid had bright blue hair, while Peto's was red.

“Just what were you thinking, Peto?”

“I just wanted to practice with the balloon harness so that I could help you and Kid work.”

Recently, Kid had proven to be a capable mechanic and began helping his father in the shop. Chief had designed a special balloon harness with an instant inflation button so that Kid could better assist him. This allowed for Kid to float up and reach parts of the car that he ordinarily would be too short to reach.

Unfortunately, Chief had not invented the balloon harness itself, just the instant inflation capability. He hoped that it would be a long time before his sons learned where the balloon harness came from.

Chief melted at the pitiful look on Peto's face. He gave the boy a loving smile. "It's fine. No one was hurt and the car wasn't damaged. I just wish that you would practice in the back yard instead. There are too many dangerous things for you to crash into here in the shop."

"Yes, father," Peto said with a downcast face.

"Now that we're all here, who wants lunch?"

"Yeah!"

The trio left the shop and entered the small house next to it, where the boys found their mother in the kitchen making sandwiches. She shouted to be heard over the noise coming from the rest of her family. "Wash up so you can eat!"

Kid and Peto went down the hall to clean up. Chief grabbed her from behind and kissed her cheek. She shook him off and groaned when she saw the grease marks on her apron. "You wash up as well. You smell like a monkey that bathed in some hot asphalt, and look almost as bad!"

Chief left for the bathroom while the two boys sat at the dining table. Kid looked at his mom and snorted trying to keep from laughing at the grease smudge on his mom's face.

A few minutes later Chief returned, and the two parents began talking to each other about things uninteresting to the two boys. Kid watched them and waited for a lull in the conversation.

When they stopped talking for a few seconds, Kid asked, "Why can't we watch T.V. during March?"

Kid's mom put her sandwich down and looked away. Chief reached over and grabbed one of her hands for support. He saw her shake her head ever so slightly from

side to side. Chief took the hint and carefully thought about his answer.

He looked at Kid and Peto and said, "Well, you see, in March the television stations air content that we feel you shouldn't be exposed to until you're a little older. Besides, I think the two of you can survive for a few weeks a year without rotting your brains with that drivel."

"Okay, I guess," Kid replied, secretly planning to find out exactly what he was being kept from seeing.

"Oh, that's right!" Chief said, turning to his wife. "Peto wants to start helping out in the shop, so I told him he can train with the spare balloon harness in the yard."

She looked concerned at this news, but simply nodded and said, "Alright. I can keep an eye on him through the windows."

The family finished eating, and the doorbell rang. "Who could be visiting at this time of the day?"

Kid and Peto followed behind their father. He reached the front door and nearly fell over due to the sight and sound of numerous reporters all speaking at once and taking flash pictures.

"What is all of this?" Chief yelled.

A thin man in a sparkling suit pushed his way to the front of the crowd. As he reached the door, the rest of the crowd became quiet, except for the sound of shuffling and camera clicks.

"Are you Mr. Tinker?" the man in the shiny suit asked.

Chief assented.

"Well, have I got good news for you!" the thin man continued. "Your son Kid has been chosen out of all the children of this region to participate in this year's Balloon Fight Games! Feel proud at this great honor!"

In confusion Kid walked up to his father's side and barely noticed the sound of plates crashing to the floor in the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” Kid asked. “What’s he talking about?”

“Are you Kid?” The stranger asked.

Kid hesitantly replied, “Yeah.” And with that the crowd of reporters erupted again, all asking questions simultaneously. Kid shielded his eyes from the flashes of light.

The thin man got control of the crowd around him again and smiled down at the boy. “You, my boy, have been selected as one of two children to represent Theta Region in the annual Balloon Fight Games! I’m Mr. Stars. I will be the guide and watcher for you and the other child selected from this region.”

Turning to speak to the crowd of reporters, Mr. Stars continued.

“And have we got a surprise coincidence this year! It turns out that for the first time in history, the two boys from a region have both been selected from the same town! Both boys are from here in Heliumburg! But there has been one snafu. For some reason, I only have Kid’s address and never received the other boy’s. But I’m sure our honored family will give us directions. Kid, Chief, do you happen to know where a boy named Peto lives?”

Kid looked up at his father and saw that Chief’s face was completely white.

“I’m Peto,” a quiet voice said from behind Kid.

Their mother screamed and rushed forward, grabbing Peto into her arms.

“Oh, my!” Mr. Stars exclaimed. “Are you two...brothers? This is a first, folks! Two siblings have been selected to enter the games in the same year! Wow, what are the odds of that?”

The reporters once again erupted in a mess of sound and flashes, trying to barge into the house around the stunned family. Mr. Stars held them back as best as he could, and followed the family into the safety of their living

room. As he closed the door he was cheerfully saying in a sing-song voice that he would now help the family plan and prepare for the games.

As soon as the door clicked shut, however, his persona changed. His shoulders dropped and he turned to the family with a look of pity on his face. "I am so very sorry. I can't believe something as horrible as this could have happened. Both of your sons being asked to compete."

"Dad, I don't understand. What's going on?" Kid asked. "What is this Balloon Fight?"

Mr. Stars looked shocked. "Don't they know?"

Chief shook his head. "We didn't want to expose them to it until they were older. Beyond the cutoff age."

"What are you talking about?" Kid yelled.

"Balloon Fight is an annual tournament in March where children are selected to compete and fight against each other. The contestants move around trying to knock each other to the ground."

"So, it's like jousting?"

"Joust?!" Mr. Stars cried indignantly. "Balloon Fight is *nothing* like Joust! You fly around on balloon harnesses and try to pop the balloons of others, while protecting your own."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Kid said. "What's the big deal?"

"Most contestants die, and those who don't sustain horrific injuries." Chief explained. "That's why the majority of the regions use a lottery system to decide who will participate. No one wants to send their own children into danger."

"If it's so bad, why do they have it?" Peto ventured to ask.

Mr. Stars gave Kid's brother a pitying look. "The sad truth is that this country is ruled by the rich, and the Alpha and Beta regions have nearly all of the wealth. The people of those regions make The Balloon Fight Games the

most watched show of the year. They also send orphans to compete. To them it's all just entertainment."

Kid and Peto stared up at the adults. Mr. Stars turned to Chief.

"Do you have a television? There should be pre-event coverage on now. I'm sure that will make it clearer to the boys."

Chief turned on the T.V. and sat down on the sofa. Kid and Peto sat on the floor with their mother hugging them from behind. Mr. Stars remained standing next to the T.V.

"...still cannot believe this!" a male news anchor with a large chin, a deep tan and bright white teeth said. "Brothers were selected for the Theta region!"

"I know I would feel honored, Paul, if both of my sons were selected," replied his female counterpart. She had short dark hair and considerable makeup, turning her face completely white except for crimson circles on her cheeks and rich purple tracings around her eyes. "Of course I'll never have to experience that, as I'm from Alpha."

"Well, Paula, there's always the chance that their parents will feel wronged if they lose both of their children to the games. You know that even people from those backwater regions love their kids."

"Which is all the more reason for them to implement the same rules as the Alpha and Beta regions," Paula, the female news anchor stated. "We act humanely to our residents by only sending trained orphans to the games."

"Absolutely right, Paula. It gives the parentless kids a purpose, trains them to have the best possible survival rate at the games, and if they fail, no one really loved the little bastards anyway. Am I right?"

Canned audience cheering and laughing followed Paul's joke. Paul and Paula simultaneously touched their

ears and looked away for a second.

"We're just getting word that another contestant has been located. This time from the Epsilon region. We go there live."

The screen cut away to a reporter walking after a suited man. "I'm here in the quaint Epsilon town of Monogram following Balloon Fight agent Mr. Whig."

Mr. Whig reached a door and knocked on it. A blonde woman answered, looking confused for a second, and then started to scream. "No, no, no! You cannot take my Henry away from me! Get away! Leave us! No!"

Mr. Whig did his best to restrain the woman as a group of burly men surged past her through the door. Mr. Whig tried to speak to the hysterical woman. "Mrs. Idaho, you know this is the law. There's nothing you can do. Your son must compete!"

The burly men came back through the door hauling a short sandy blonde kid in their arms. The kid fought, but clearly had no hope of escaping. Mrs. Idaho also fought and was equally unsuccessful.

"Why?" Mrs. Idaho wailed as her son was taken away from her. "Why must you take our children away? Why must kids be sent to their deaths in these games?"

The image suddenly switched back to Paul and Paula sitting comfortably behind their news desk. Both anchors had warm friendly smiles on their faces.

"There you have it, our first image of a contestant from Epsilon, Henry Idaho." As Paul spoke, a still image of Henry's face taken during the struggle was overlaid on the corner of the screen. "I guess we'll see if this kid's fighting spirit will help him in the games."

"Paul, while we wait for the next candidate to be revealed, I think now is the perfect time to address the questions of Henry's mother, as we are asked those same questions every year."

“Ah yes, Paula. Why do we select children to compete in the Balloon Fight Games?”

“As we always explain, the answer is quite simple,” Paula stated. “The balloons can only support a small amount of weight. Picking young children is necessary to ensure that they are small enough to fly.”

“And,” Paul interjected, “they are just so gosh darned cute while they fight for their lives.” Both anchors once again reached for their ears.

“Oh my!” Paula exclaimed. “We’ve just got an interesting bit of news. You remember those two cute little brothers from Theta?” A still image showing Kid and his family popped up on the screen. Kid felt awkward and a little embarrassed at seeing himself there.

“Who could forget?” Paul replied.

“It seems that some sharp eyes realized that Mr. Tinker is in fact the man commonly referred to as Chief, the engineer who specializes in making custom cars for the rich and famous.”

“Oh, yes!” Paul said. “Wasn’t Balloon Fight Minister Corba seen driving one recently?”

“You’re right,” Paula replied. “Although there are rumors that that specific car was in fact designed for someone else as Chief turned down Minister Corba. Of course, that’s just silly. Why would such a commoner, even if he is a great engineer, refuse a request from a great man like the Minister?”

Kid’s mother spoke up. “Oh, Chief. You didn’t, did you?”

Chief looked at his wife. “I had to refuse him. I could sense that he was a bad man.”

“But, because of you, we’re losing our sons.”

“If I knew this was going to happen, I might have done things differently. But this is on his head, not mine. And it only confirms that he is as bad as I suspected.”

“My God,” Mr. Stars interjected. “You realize what you’re implying aren’t you? The candidate selection is rigged?”

“This surprises you?” Chief shot back. “Look through the history of the Balloon Fight Games. How many times has the son of some activist or local political candidate been selected? Too often, if you ask me. The selection isn’t random.”

“My God,” Mr. Stars repeated. “I promise you I’ll look into it. I don’t know if it will do any good for your boys, but maybe I can make some difference for the future.” Mr. Stars pointed at the television. “They are beginning to discuss the games.”

“This year’s games take place on a tropical island just off the coast. Its exact location is secret to all but those who are in charge. Care was taken to prevent even the construction crews from knowing.” The camera shifted to a rotating view of sand, ocean and green grass. “This scenic location has been transformed into the perfect tournament location. For the contestants, comfortable barracks to hold their gear and allow them a peaceful night’s sleep have been constructed.”

The scene changed to a view of an island with a large lake in the center and patches of ground hovering hundreds of feet in the air.

“And, of course the arena! Here you can see that this year offers some interesting surprises. In particular, we have constructed a number of small floating islands using repulsor technology. These islands offer perches for the contestants to start and rest on, while also allowing them to safely fly over or under. The lake in the center of the island is salt water, and is filled with deadly flesh eating barracudas that can clean all the meat off of bones in an instant!

“There are also a couple of new traps. We have what we like to call ‘bouncers.’ These little devices float in

the air and anyone who bumps into them are suddenly and violently thrown away! And last, but certainly not least, electric generators have been constructed that excel at charging the atmosphere and causing balls of floating lightning to form! While occasional lighting balls enter the arena, the main use of these generators is to charge up the area around the island creating a deadly lightning storm to prevent any unauthorized individuals from entering or leaving.

“The actual game itself consists of one-on-one and team battles, where a number of contestants duke it out with each other in the sky. Each round starts with the combatants inflating their balloons and then soaring into the sky using their puffer thrusters. The goal is to pop their opponent’s balloons, forcing them down to the ground, or into the water. Most contestants also carry a parachute to allow them to attempt to float down to safety and inflate a spare balloon. A contestant remains in the game until they are either knocked unconscious, killed, or land in the ocean, which of course they cannot survive. Each round lasts until only one contestant or team remains.”

“Oh, wow.” Kid whispered to himself in shock.

“Hmmm.” Chief muttered as he scratched his chin. “Mr. Stars, what are the rules associated with the contestants’ gear? Are there any restrictions on what they can have?”

Mr. Stars twisted his lips as he thought. “Well, of course they must have at least one balloon. And puffer thrusters to fly and move around. Each round starts with deflated balloons, so they must also have a pump. Besides that the rules are fairly open. It’s common to have a parachute. The contestants also usually wear long-beaked bird masks, but that’s more tradition, and I know many have gone in without them. I also know that custom gear occasionally shows up, such as spiked shoes, hand knives, things like that. Why?”

Chief smiled. "I think I have a way of giving our boys an advantage."

Peto jumped up. "You mean the instant inflation harness?"

"Yes, son. You see, Mr. Stars, I designed a harness that instantly inflates *two* balloons. If the kids use it, they would have a distinct advantage."

"I see..." Mr. Stars said.

"The only issue is that they wouldn't be able to carry a parachute."

"With two balloons and a head start, they may not need a parachute," Mr. Stars said. "I suddenly have high hopes for you boys."

* * *

Over the next week, Mr. Stars taught the boys about the finer points of Balloon Fight. During that time, Kid also trained Peto on using the balloon harness. Chief emptied his shop, giving the boys a large space to practice while keeping spying eyes from their surprise technological advantage.

Peto proved to be a quick study in the air. By the end of the week, Kid and Peto were sparring by attacking each other and trying to pop each other's balloons. They were, of course, careful about only popping one balloon at a time.

Mr. Stars also warned them of the threats to watch out for. Besides the arena traps, he told them how some contestants attached various sharp objects to their bodies. He placed the greatest emphasis on the dangers associated with the contestants of Alpha and Beta. The orphans are trained for years and participate in many local Balloon Fight competitions, with only the champions being sent to the National games. For the last fifty years, the victor of the Balloon Fight Games has been from Alpha or Beta, and challengers from the other regions almost never saw the final round.

After the week was up, Kid and Peto packed up, said goodbye to their parents, and left for their destinies with Mr. Stars.

* * *

“Wake up Kid, we’re here.”

Kid opened his eyes at the sound of his brother’s voice, and winced as he found himself staring directly at the sun. Sitting up, Kid realized two things. First, he ached all over, especially in the front of his head. Second, he was sitting on a sandy beach with a wide open ocean directly in front of him.

“Where?” Kid muttered in confusion at the sight.

“We’re on the island, dummy!” Peto said.

Kid tried to make sense of things, but was still groggy. Island? Why would I be on an island? Everything about the Balloon Fight Games came rushing to his mind. He thought back to the last thing he could recall. After leaving home, Mr. Stars had taken them to a hotel, where he ordered room service. Kid remembered getting very sleepy during the meal, and that was it. Kid realized Mr. Stars must have drugged the food to keep them from knowing where the island is.

Peto bent over at the waist to make his face level with Kid’s. “Hello, in there! Are you gonna start doing something today?”

Kid glared at his younger brother, then got to his feet. He groaned from the stiffness of his muscles and joints. He thought of his father making the same sounds whenever he got out of bed in the morning. *So, this is what it feels like to be old*, Kid thought.

He stretched as he looked around. The packs containing all of their gear were lying in the sand nearby. A group of palm trees partially blocked their view of a building.

“Alright, I’m up. Grab your pack and let’s go look around.”

They made their way away from the beach and through the trees towards the building. Passing through the trees, they entered a clearing around the building, which turned out to be a cabin with a large THETA above the door. They saw that the clearing was divided into sections by a metal fence. A dirt path led from the front of the cabin to a gate in the fence, where a guard was visible.

The guard called out behind him and a thin man wearing a suit jacket, tie, shorts and sandals ran up. The strangely dressed thin man was allowed through the gate, where he quickly approached Kid and Peto, all the time waving to get their attention.

"Hi!" the thin man said cheerfully. "You must be Kid and Peto. I'm Leon. I'll be your host on this island to make sure you enjoy your stay. Well, except for the horrific fighting and your most likely gruesome deaths, but, hey, no vacation is perfect. This here is your cabin. Each region has its own, so only you two are staying here. And don't worry about sharing because it's likely at least one of you won't survive for long."

At this, Kid looked shocked and Peto started crying.

"I'm sorry, it was just a joke," Leon said. "I forgot you were brothers. I'm sure you're used to sharing. Anyways, the fence and guards are here to separate the regions and prevent tampering or sabotage. In the off periods, you are free to do as you wish, as long as you stay in your section of the island. I advise against swimming, as some of the barracuda managed to escape and are lurking around the island. Also, if you practice flying, don't go too far offshore. You may come into contact with the ball lightning.

"Meals are held with the other contestants in the area near the arena. A horn will sound when it's meal time, and the guard will let you through the gate. The horn will also sound to let you know when the individual rounds of the game are to begin. One long blast means meal time,

while two short blasts indicate game time, so don't forget your equipment. Oh, and be sure to show up as the guards get grumpy when they have to hunt you down. There's no telling what a grumpy guard might do to you or your gear! Anyway, once again, welcome to the island! Don't hesitate to let me know if I can get you anything, such as lawn chairs, sodas, or whatever!"

"How about a boat?" Kid asked. "Or a plane?"

"I could use a visit from our parents," Peto added. "And some more time, like, I don't know, fifty or sixty years."

Leon shook his head. "I always get the smart alecks. Well, it's better than the whiners, I guess." He turned and walked away. "Put your stuff away. Dinner will be very soon."

Kid and Peto went into the cabin, where they found two large beds, a sofa, a table, and a shelf filled with toys and games. They had just begun looking through the games when the whole cabin shook from a deep horn blast. Silently they left the cabin and walked up to the gate, where the guard nodded and let them through. Far to both sides they saw other pairs of boys entering through similar gates.

The boys followed the dirt path, which eventually converged with the paths that the other contestants were following. Kid realized that the path was avoiding a sizable chunk of land. He looked in that direction and saw a large, circular lake. Above the lake, he saw small shadows that he initially thought were birds, but they weren't moving. Kid realized that must be the arena.

The path led the boys to a cluster of four tables. One of the tables was already occupied by four boys, who were laughing amongst themselves.

Kid, Peto, and two other pairs of contestants approached from one direction, and six other contestants approached from across the way. The four at the table

stopped laughing. One child sighed loudly and said, "Darn, the crappy regions are here. I was hoping that they would be too stupid to find it, or smart enough not to bother us."

Kid rolled his eyes and walked to one of the other tables.

The rude boy said, "Did you see that? He just disrespected a better." All four of the boys stood up and approached Kid.

Kid got his first good look at the rude one. Short, black spiked hair, and two cruel grey eyes accented the boy's pale white face.

"Apologize," the rude boy demanded of Kid.

Kid looked at the other boy, puzzled. "For what?"

"No one gets away with disrespecting me," the rude boy said. "How dare someone from a backwater region do that to an Alpha."

"You're an Alpha?" Kid innocently asked.

"How can you not recognize me? I'm your superior. I'm the one who's going to win this! I'll destroy you, if you can even survive long enough to face me! Now, do you know me?"

Kid shook his head. "Still no. Am I supposed to?"

One of the other boys came up from behind and tapped Kid on his shoulder. Kid recognized the new boy as Henry Idaho, the child from Epsilon.

Henry loudly whispered to Kid, "That's Mikey, the champion of the Alpha region. He became champion on the orphan circuit by brutally beating, maiming and killing his opponents. He's never lost. And his companions are all also Alpha and Beta champions who are almost as bad."

Mikey smiled like a predator as Kid learned this information. "Now, do you have an apology for me?" Mikey asked.

Kid looked Mikey square in the face. "Yes, I do. I'm sorry you're such an ass."

At this, Mikey, the other Alpha, and the Betas looked shocked and charged forward to attack Kid. Peto and Henry remained where they were, but the other boys nearby backed away.

But, before any fighting could commence a loud gunshot rung out and a group of guards ran over to the cluster of children. "Break it up!" The leader of the guards yelled. "Save the fighting for the games. It would be a shame for you to get hurt without the cameras rolling."

As the guards separated the boys and took them to different tables, Mikey yelled out, "You're dead, Kid!"

Kid smiled and called back. "That's funny. An Alpha knows who I am, even though I didn't know who he was."

Following this, guards remained between the tables all throughout dinner. Kid and Mikey exchanged glares all through the meal. When everyone was finished, the guards escorted each region back to their individual sectors of the island to prevent any other incidents.

Finally alone, the stress got to Kid and Peto and the two of them started crying. To calm down, they played board games in their cabin until they passed out from exhaustion.

* * *

HONK HONK!

Kid grimaced at the double horns that woke him up. He found himself lying on the floor. Looking up, he saw that Peto had managed to make it to his bed last night, but had failed to help his brother.

Still groggy, Kid stood up and looked out the window. The sun was just beginning to rise. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

Kid walked over to his still sleeping brother. "Wake up!"

Peto rolled over and muttered, "Noooo."

Kid grabbed Peto's blankets and yanked them off the bed.

“Hey!” Peto sat up, noticed his surroundings, and said, “Oh, yeah.”

The two brothers helped each other get ready and attach their balloon harnesses. With safety helmets in hand, they left the cabin and went to the gate. As they walked towards the arena at the center of the island, they saw a flurry of activity. Workers and guards were bustling around, making sure everything was in place and operational, which included a number of floating cameras all around the arena.

Not knowing where else to go, Kid and Peto headed to the tables where they had eaten the night before and saw that some of the other boys had begun to gather there. Getting closer, they saw that a large television had been set up above the tables, showing Paul and Paula reporting on the events.

“...such a beautiful day for Balloon Fight, wouldn’t you agree, Paula?”

“Yes it is, Paul. It’s nice and clear, meaning we won’t miss a second of the action.”

Kid watched the television as he walked, and the image on the screen changed to Kid and Peto walking. Kid stopped and watched the image of himself stop as well. He turned and found the camera pointing directly at them. The other boys at the tables got up and walked over to get on television.

“It seems everyone’s favorite brothers have arrived,” blasted Paul’s voice through the speakers. “That is some interesting gear that they are wearing, isn’t it, Paula?”

“Yes, Paul. I wonder if their father, the engineer Chief, had anything to do with it. I don’t see any bird masks in their hands, so I’m wondering if they are skipping that tradition.”

“How about we ask them? Kid, do you have anything you want to say about the games, competing with

your brother, or your gear?"

"Yeah, I do," Kid said, hearing his voice echo through the speakers. "It's bad enough that we have to fight against each other. But now we're being forced to listen to Paul and Paula? Where's the humanity?"

The other children, now behind the two brothers, joined in and threw insults at the camera.

"You suck, Paul and Paula!"

"Their initials are P.P.!"

"Ewww, we're being forced to watch peepee!"

Paula's voice came over the speaker. "That's just rude."

"What do you expect from the lesser regions?" said Paul. "Cut the sound feed."

With no sound being transmitted, Kid and the other boys resorted to making faces and obscene gestures at the camera.

"Show something else!" Paul yelled, and the image on the television changed to shots of the arena.

The entire cluster of boys laughed and gave each other high-fives. Kid and Peto sat at the same table as Henry and the other Epsilon. The Alphas and Betas were the last of the contestants to arrive. When they showed up, all of the talking at the tables ceased.

Mikey gave a cruel smile. "I hope that you're all prepared to die, 'cuz I'm ready to make it happen."

Kid felt a chill go through him as he realized that Mikey was being completely truthful.

Leon walked up to the tables from the direction of the arena. "Good! Everyone's here," Leon said. "Here's how the games will go today. All matches are two-on-two, and the teams are determined by your regions. Since there are eight regions, there will be four matches. The matches are Zeta vs. Theta, Alpha vs. Gamma, Epsilon vs. Eta, and Beta vs. Delta. We'll serve a small breakfast, then I expect

you all to go to the arena and prepare. Remember Zeta and Theta teams; you are up first!"

* * *

The next thirty minutes were a blur for Kid. At the end of it, he found himself standing on a floating platform a hundred feet in the air with Peto next to him.

"I'm scared, Kid," Peto said. Kid looked over and saw his brother trying to hold back tears.

"It'll be okay, Peto, just follow my lead." Kid adjusted his helmet and shifted his feet. He felt the resistance from the ground as the cleats on the bottom of his shoes pulled up some of the grass. Kid and Peto refused to wear any blades or other sharp objects, but Chief had insisted that they wear soccer shoes to help with popping balloons.

Looking across the arena, Kid spied the two boys from Zeta, each on a separate floating platform. They both wore identical bird masks, preventing the two brothers from recognizing who was who. The closer of the opponents saw Kid looking at him and gave a slight nod of his head. Kid swallowed and nodded back. This silent acknowledgment was a gesture that signaled to the other side that they were not only ready to compete, but ready to face the consequences of losing.

Paul and Paula's voices suddenly blasted over speakers pointed at the arena. Kid sighed.

"It looks like they're ready to begin," Paul's voice said. "This is it, folks! The first match of this year's Balloon Fight Games!"

The deep horn gave a short burst, and Kid could see the Zeta boys cranking their air pumps to inflate their balloons. Kid yelled, "Now, Peto!" and slapped a button on his chest.

In an instant, Kid's balloons inflated and he felt himself lift into the air.

“Oh, my! Did you see that?” Paul’s voice boomed around Kid.

“Unbelievable!” answered Paula. “Kid and Peto just instantly inflated *two* balloons apiece!”

Kid’s puffer thrusters sent him flying through the sky. In an instant, Kid reached his opponent and slammed into him shoulder first. The Zeta boy flew sideways and landed on his side on the floating platform. The air pump that the Zeta had been using fell down.

“One down!” Paul’s voice announced.

A shadow flashed over Kid and he saw Peto soaring up towards the other opponent. The other Zeta had nearly inflated his balloon when Peto popped it with a kick. Kid followed a couple seconds later driving his knee into the back of the Zeta’s head, knocking the boy out.

“And it’s over!” Paul’s voice said. “Can you believe that? The first match is already over!”

“That had to have been the quickest round of Balloon Fight ever,” Paula answered. “And it was all due to that fancy gear that the two Tinker brothers are using!”

* * *

Kid and Peto spent the rest of the morning sitting at the tables and watching the three other matches on the large television. In the second match, one of the Alphas had an unfortunate accident where the cord attached to his balloon snapped, causing him to plummet. For some reason, the Alpha’s parachute failed to open and he hit the ground near the lake after falling over a hundred feet. The remaining Alpha proved ruthless, popping one of the Gamma’s balloons over the barracuda-filled water so that the boy slowly glided with his parachute to his watery death. The other Gamma also met a violent end as the Alpha popped the balloon, then came back around to shred the parachute. The Gamma hit the edge of one floating platform, causing him to start spinning as he fell hard into a lower platform.

Shortly after that match, Mikey walked by the tables gloating. "I knew I could win, and I don't like to share credit, so I sabotaged my partner's gear last night. If I can do that to someone I kinda liked, just imagine what I'll do to you. Even with your fancy gear, you won't stand a chance!"

Before Kid could respond, Mikey turned and walked away. The two Zetas that had faced Kid and Peto also showed up before the third match. They thanked the brothers for not killing them, and then left for their section of the island.

During the third match, Henry and his fellow Epsilon proved capable contestants and took out their Eta opponents with ease. The Epsilons also did their best to minimize injuries and left the Etas with only hurt prides, bruised heads, and one sprained ankle. Kid was happy that his new friend Henry had survived.

The Epsilons joined Kid and Peto at the table to watch the final match. It turned to be the longest and most interesting of the day as both the Betas and Deltas were more than capable flyers. But, in the end, the Betas worked together to dispose of the two Deltas, sending both into the center of the lake.

With the games over for the day, the Thetas and Epsilons said goodbye to each other and went back to their cabins. The rest of the day and all of the next saw the survivors hiding in their own sections, only getting together for the announced meals.

* * *

"Listen up!" Leon called out on the third morning. "Due to the unexpected advantage offered by Kid's and Peto's balloon harnesses, the Balloon Fight committee held an emergency conference to determine how to proceed. They determined that there was no way to change the rules and outlaw instant inflation, at least not this year. But they also agreed that it offered a clear and decisive advantage.

So they've decided to make things more balanced and thrilling. Today there will be only two matches. In the first, Kid will be by himself, with Mikey and the Betas teamed up against him. For the second, Peto will face both Epsilons. Any questions?" Before any of the boys could speak, Leon said "Good," and left.

Peto gave Henry and the other Epsilon a weak smile.

Mikey grinned at Kid and said, "This'll be fun."

* * *

Kid looked around the arena. He had been given one of the lowest perches, with his three opponents above him and equal distances apart in three different directions. All three already had their bird masks on, preventing him from being able to recognize Mikey. Kid felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, and looked over to see a cloud discharge a ball of lightning. Kid made a mental note to stay far away from that cloud.

Looking between the three distant figures, Kid picked one and prepared for the match. The horn blew and Kid inflated his balloons and soared into the air.

"And they're off!" Paul's voice could be heard.

Kid reached his first opponent in a few seconds and saw the boy turn to face him while cranking the balloon's pump for all it was worth. Kid altered his flight slightly and kicked out, snagging the toe of his shoe on his opponent's pump. The air pump went flying and fell from the platform.

"Wow! What a kick!" Paula called out. "That must really pump up Kid's spirits, don't you think Paul?"

Kid slowed his motion and turned to look for the other two boys. He saw one rise into the air and begin moving closer. Suddenly Kid heard a pop, and looked up to see that the other opponent managed to sneak up and destroy one of his balloons. Kid quickly changed course to escape.

The opponent who had popped Kid's balloon flew down at the grounded boy who Kid had disarmed of his pump and kicked hard into the back of the grounded boy's head. The boy tumbled off of the platform. He must have been unconscious, as he never activated his parachute.

Paul's voice said, "Well, I guess you *can* kick a man when he is down! Or, at least a young boy."

Kid never saw where the downed boy landed as he had to move quickly. Kid soared closely by his opponent, feeling the change of wind due to their passing.

With barely any time to react, the opponent who had popped Kid's first balloon returned and flew in for a second attack. In a move of desperation, Kid greatly increased his speed and altitude and flew directly at the approaching boy. The other boy realized too late what was happening, and the two crashed into each other.

The cords of their balloons twisted together. Kid punched, kicked, slapped and pushed, and his opponent responded in kind. Kid got a hold of the other boy's bird mask and twisted it so that he couldn't see. The boy then yanked off his mask, revealing Kid's opponent to be Mikey!

Kid and Mikey continued to struggle with each other as they floated uncontrollably around the arena. At one point, they bounced off the side of one of the floating platforms and started to spin.

After what seemed like minutes, but in reality was only a handful of seconds, a shadow passed overhead and a loud pop was heard. Kid noticed that they were slowly sinking as one balloon was not enough to keep two people afloat. Looking down, both Kid and Mikey saw that they were headed towards the water. They switched from hitting and kicking to trying to separate.

Suddenly, they were free of each other! Kid felt weightlessness and Mikey smiled at him, thinking that it was Kid who was left without a balloon.

But then Kid felt a tug upward and saw Mikey fall away. Mikey's smile disappeared and for the first time, Kid saw fear in his face. Mikey hit the water with a splash. Foam bubbled up; first white, then tinted with blood.

"Whoo!" Paul's voice cheered. "I'm sorry, Mikey, but you've just been let go!"

Breathing hard, Kid looked up for his remaining opponent. The Beta was turning around and preparing to come back for another flyby.

Kid saw a platform slightly off to his left. A plan formed in his head and Kid used his puffer thruster to gain as much speed as possible. The Beta saw Kid make a break for the platform and he did the same.

The hairs on Kid's neck rose again, and he suddenly remembered the electric discharging cloud. Instinctively, Kid juke'd right and saw a bright crackling ball narrowly miss his face as he shot by. He corrected his course back to the platform. The Beta was also getting close and had a slight elevation advantage on Kid.

Feeling his feet touch the ground, Kid jumped as hard as he could, causing him to shoot straight up in the air. With no way to correct his course, the Beta suddenly found himself below Kid.

There was a loud pop, and then the Beta was falling. He activated his parachute, but, unfortunately, his momentum took him straight towards the electric cloud. A lightning ball sparked out and connected in a bright flash. The charred and smoking body continued to coast down and landed limply on the ground.

"I bet he was shocked by that move!" said Paul.

Kid came to a soft landing on one of the platforms. He felt his whole body start shaking, and collapsed onto the ground in relief.

"Paul, this goes to show the doubters that Kid is a capable Balloon Fighter who's not simply relying on his technology."

“Soon we’ll see if it runs in the family.”
Thinking of his brother, Kid began to cry.

* * *

An hour later, Kid sat at one of the tables outside the arena. He was there to watch his brother’s match on the large television screen. No other boys were there, as they were either in the upcoming match, hiding in their cabins as survivors, or dead.

Kid tried to keep his thoughts from wandering back to the last match and focused instead on the smiling televised faces of Paul and Paula. As always, they were spouting their inane chatter.

“We’ve got about a minute to go until the next match,” Paula casually announced. “Let’s check out the contestants.”

The image switched to a rotating view of the arena, where Kid saw his brother on a floating island in the center of the arena, and the two masked Epsilons equidistant on either side. Kid tried to determine which of the two was Henry.

“To recap, this match pits the Epsilon team against Peto from Theta. Peto has the distinct advantage of the instant inflation capability, which will likely allow him to incapacitate one of the two Epsilons before they are able to get off the ground. But, in the first round, both Epsilons proved to be more than adequate fighters once airborne, whereas Peto is still untested.”

“You’re right, Paul. But Peto’s brother Kid single-handedly dispatched the three Alpha and Beta champions this morning. If Peto proves to be even half as good as his brother, this should be an interesting match. Let’s watch.”

Paul and Paula went silent and Kid watched anxiously.

“Come on Peto,” Kid muttered to himself.

The horn on the island blared, causing the tensed Kid to jump slightly. A split second later, the horn echoed

on the television and the match started.

Kid watched as Peto's balloons suddenly appeared, and his brother was lifted into the air. Both Epsilons started cranking their pumps as quickly as possible, trying to inflate their balloons before Peto could reach them.

Peto shot through the air at full speed directly at one of his opponents. Kid saw Peto line himself up with the boy standing on the platform, but Peto was slightly too high for a sideways tackle. Peto bent his leg back and prepared to kick the Epsilon in the back of the head.

Just as Peto swung his leg forward, the boy on the platform turned. Instead of the top of Peto's shoe connecting with the back of the other boy's head, Peto's cleats caught the boy in the chin. The Epsilon's mask twisted sideways, and blood splattered everywhere. The injured Epsilon dropped his pump, grabbed his bleeding neck and face, and stumbled backwards.

"Oh, God!" Peto's voice came over the television. The stumbling boy's foot caught on something, and he tumbled off of the platform.

"No no no no!" Kid said as he stood up and approached the television. He heard his brother echo the same thing.

As the whole world watched, the falling boy landed head first on a platform fifty feet below with a sickening crack.

"Nooooo!" Peto's voice wailed over the television.

"Ooh, that's a tough break for that contestant!" Paul's voice called out over Peto's wailing and sobbing.

Kid watched in horrified silence as his brother cried and floated through the air.

"Wait, what's going on over there?" Paula said. "Zoom in on the other Epsilon."

A close up of the surviving Epsilon contestant appeared on the screen. The boy had stopped inflating his balloon and was staring off-screen. He reached up and

pulled off his bird mask. It was Henry. Henry tossed the mask to the ground and kicked his air pump aside. Finally, he raised his arms in the air and stared directly at the camera.

“What’s he doing?” Paul asked.

“I think he’s surrendering. Can he do that?”

“I don’t know. No contestant has ever tried before.”

Kid heard a loud clicking and scuffling. A deep male voice boomed across the landscape, with a delayed echo on the television. “This is Minister Corba. Our country doesn’t tolerate cowards and quitters, even in our children. Cut the power to the platform repulsors.”

Henry’s struggled to grab his balloon and pump, but he was too late. As the camera zoomed out, all of the platforms in the arena began plummeting to the ground, taking Henry with them.

“Activate your parachute!” Kid screamed at the television, but immediately realized that it would do no good. Henry’s platform was directly over the barracuda filled lake. In a couple seconds, it was all over. All that was left of the arena was the still sobbing Peto, hovering above the rubble of land and the agitated surface of the water.

* * *

What the cameras and television didn’t show was Kid being called in to help his brother down. Once safe, Kid spent the remainder of the day in the cabin trying to comfort his brother. Neither one ate.

In the early evening, Peto passed out from the exhaustion of crying all day and Kid carried him to bed. Kid then tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw the terror in Mikey’s face. He eventually fell into a restless sleep, haunted by the day’s events.

The next morning, Kid awoke to the sound of the horn. He forced Peto to get up go to breakfast with him. Peto was unusually quiet and moved through the morning like a zombie.

When they reached the tables for breakfast, they found that the surviving contestants from the Zeta and Eta regions had come out of their cabins to join them. The other boys congratulated and consoled Kid and Peto for the previous day's matches. They talked about how it was finally over, and began to wonder when they could go home.

After breakfast the six boys remained near the tables and played games with each other. It took a while, but Peto finally started to relax and smile again.

Before long, it was lunchtime. Leon showed up at the same time as their meal. "Hey Leon! Now that the games are over, when do we get to go home?"

Leon gave kid a confused frown. "The games aren't over yet."

"What do you mean not over? We won didn't we?" Kid asked.

"There's still the final," Leon said. "Each Balloon Fight Games has one and only one champion. So, tomorrow you and your brother..."

"You can't do that!" yelled one of the boys. The others joined in as well.

Kid's face went white at the news. He looked over and saw that Peto had once again retreated into himself and sat staring unfocused at the table.

Leon left. The other children tried to comfort and support Kid, but no one knew how to react or what to say.

Kid eventually thanked the others and told them to leave so that he could talk to Peto alone.

"What are we gonna do?" Peto weakly asked.

Kid sat and thought. "I don't think I can fight you."

"But we have to!" Peto exclaimed. "You saw what they did to Henry. If we refuse, they'll kill us both. But if we compete, one of us will make it."

"Do we compete, or refuse?" Kid muttered. Then an idea struck him. "There's always option C."

“What’s option C?”

“We wait until nightfall. Then we make a break for land. This island is just offshore somewhere and I’m confident that I can dodge the lightning balls. All you have to do is follow close behind me.”

“How will we know which way to go?” Peto asked.

“Easy,” Kid replied. “All of the matches took place early in the morning. This means that for the whole country to watch us live, we’ve got to be off the west coast. We just need to head east and we should reach land in no time.”

Peto listened to the confidence in his brother’s voice. After a few seconds Peto replied. “Okay.”

Kid and Peto spent the rest of the day together, never again mentioning their decision. They sat on the beach, watching the sunset, and stared out until all of the sun’s light was gone.

Sneaking into their cabin, they put on their balloon harnesses and went back to the beach. “Ready?” Kid asked.

“Ready.”

With clicks and high pitched squeals, they inflated their balloons and headed into the sky. Higher and higher Kid went. He imagined himself soaring up and into the stars, even believing that the stars were moving around him. Then he realized that they were, or at least balls of lightning were.

“Stick with me now, Peto.”

Despite the danger, Kid couldn’t help but think how beautiful it was to fly through the night surrounded by the floating orbs of light.

* * *

Back in their home, Chief and his wife sat on the sofa watching television. They had their arms around each other for comfort. So far their children Kid and Peto had survived the Balloon Fight Games, but they feared what tomorrow would bring with the final match. As they

watched some mindless show to distract themselves, the feed suddenly cut away, and Paul and Paula appeared.

Paul was the first to speak. "Sorry for interrupting your regularly scheduled program, but we have some sudden developments related to the Balloon Fight Games. It seems that Kid and Peto, our two finalists, have opted to skip out from the final match, and are currently flying through the lightning storm, trying to escape to the mainland."

"What!?" Chief cried out. Both he and his wife sat up.

"Here we show live footage of the two brothers, taken from floating cameras high above the ocean," said Paula. "As you can see, Peto is following closely behind Kid as they rise and fall, dodging the numerous lightning balls."

"Paula, what do you think of their chances of making it?"

"I don't know, Paul. But I do know that contestants from previous years have tried this very same escape, and none have succeeded."

"These two have defied all expectations," said Paul. "They showed incredible leniency in their first round, despite having a huge advantage over their opponents. Then, despite all odds, we saw Kid take out the three top-rated players in one match, denying the Alpha and Beta regions a tournament victory for the first time in decades. At this point, I wouldn't bet against them pulling off the remarkable."

"You're right Paul. In fact, if our calculations are correct, they've nearly broke the record for furthest flight through the lightning storm. Just a few more feet. *Yes! There it is!* They are now ranked #1!"

"There you have it folks. Now, we wait and watch to see if they reach land."

Paul's voice became quieter and his words inaudible as it sounded as if he was talking with someone off screen.

“I’ve just been informed that Minister Corba has prepared a statement. We now go to him, live.”

The scene of Kid and Peto flying through the night was replaced with the rigid square face of an angry looking bald man.

“This is Minister Corba,” the man said in his deep voice. “I know you are all concerned about this recent turn in events. Let me ease your worries. First of all, the cowards Kid and Peto will never reach land, because there is no land. We lied when we said that the island was just off shore. In fact, it is in the middle of the ocean, hundreds of miles from the mainland. Their flight will end when they fail.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. If Kid and Peto are both lost, who is this year’s champion? This year was unprecedented in that we have four competitors who survived. The final match will go on as planned, but will now be a free for all between the four survivors. The battle will take place over the ocean and all platforms will be removed once the contestants are in the air. It will be a battle to the death, with the sole survivor our Balloon Fight champion.”



RING KING

by Robert Holt

Chapter 1

The Ring Walk

Talent cannot be taught. You are born with talent. Talent is in your blood. Without talent you're left with only skill. Skill can serve you well if you work hard and remain dedicated, but greatness is reserved for those select few talented individuals of the world. The likes of the Sandman, Macho Man, and Little Mac work hard to tone skills, but the natural talent that pumps through their veins is what separates them from the likes of me. I know people are quick to point out the few rare exceptions of skilled fighters that are able to break the glass ceiling and make it to the big show. Don Flamenco is the one name everybody likes to throw out. But tell me this, what was Don Flamenco's claim to fame? Getting his face beat in by Little Mac! Regardless, I am no Kid Madrid. I am a tomato can, a palooka, a bum. I will never make it to the big show. For guys like me, there is only one way to get a minor taste of glory, and that is in the Ring King tournament.

I entered the tournament with a winning record, and I was proud of that, but when I saw that I was fighting J. Crush in the first round I was a little worried. He is a good fighter.

The night, however, was mine. I ended up knocking him out in the third round. That victory set up the grudge match with E. Apollo, who was coming off a first round demolition over B. Sothpa. Again the night was mine.

It was amazing, really. Apollo and I had faced each other three times prior to that fight, and he had won all three times in close fights. This time, I came in with an extra notch on my power meter and it paid dividends. I was able to floor him early in the second and finish him a few seconds later.

Those victories were meaningless though. All they did was move me closer to the true fight. A. Madman was the tournament favorite, an honor he had earned with back to back first round knockouts. The first one was over C. Rocky and then S. Ropes. Quite frankly, I was scared out of my mind of him. I had faced him once before in training, and he had flattened me rather quickly.

Before the fight I sat in my dressing room, my leg jittering nervously. My trainer came in and leaned against a locker in front of me. I looked at

her feet, and then I looked away, into the endless realm of possible futures.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to think. Christ, I didn’t want to exist.

She came up to me and squatted down in front of me. She lifted my chin so that I met her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, but she didn’t buy that. We had been working together too long for her to buy that. “Just nervous, that’s all.”

“Is it because of what happened in training? Because that was just training.”

“It’s not that,” I said. “I just think he is better than me. More talented.” I said talented with a sneer, and she knew what I was getting on about.

“This isn’t the Major Circuit. Hell, this isn’t even the Minor Circuit. This is the Ring King,” she said. I know she was meaning it to be a confidence booster, but really she was making me feel more and more shitty. “If you think A. Madman could last a round against Piston Honda then you are as crazy as Soda Popinski.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I said. “He is just shit, and I am worse than shit.”

She playfully slapped me across the face. “That’s not what I am saying at all, and you know it. I am saying that he isn’t a god. He is just another Ring King contestant like you. If he was better, people would remember his name.”

“I was just thinking,” I said as I looked off in space. “Maybe I need a new trainer. Doc was able to take Little Mac from zero to hero. Maybe he could do the same for me.”

She laughed at this and slapped me again. “That fat fuck would have a heart attack if he had to sit and watch you fight.” She put her hands on my knees and got right in my face. “Besides, the Nintendo Fun Club wouldn’t help you.” She kissed me, kissed me hard. Her hands snaked up the legs of my shorts where they found the cup. “And besides, he wouldn’t be able to recharge you between the rounds.”

I laughed and pushed her hands away. Just then a security guard came in. “It’s time, champ.”

I rolled my eyes at being called champ.

It is an honorary term for most fighters, but for the talentless, it is a mockery.

I took a deep breath and clambered to my feet. My trainer helped me into my robe, and she ran her fingers through my red fro. She kissed me again and then twirled my mustache between her fingers. “Go get him.”

I winked at her, and we walked out into the roaring heart of the stadium. The announcers were screaming and flailing about. But Madman just stood there looking at me. Throwing jabs in my direction. As the ring announcer introduced us, I, too, shadowboxed to stay warm.

Then the bell rang, and everything else in the world vanished. It was just me, A. Madman and the pasty, bald ref.

Chapter 2

Feeling Out

The fight started as every one of my fights does, with me jabbing. I hit him and moved away, he came at me and I stuck him again and again. Ten seconds in and I was starting to feel okay. I was starting to relax. Self-confidence is a crucial part of boxing. It is the fuel that drives you on and keeps you moving forward towards a big man that wants to knock your freaking head off. Without confidence a fighter is a wreck.

Look at Glass Joe. He isn't a fighter, just a punching bag with legs and pale floppy tits. But the dude thinks he is something special. Because of his confidence he gets shots at all the big names and on occasion is able to get some good work in. And that was where my mind needed to be.

I stepped in on Madman and landed a nasty little right cross. His head snapped and a cloud of sweat danced off his brow. I didn't entertain the idea that I had hurt him with the punch, but seeing his head snap filled me with gusto.

I danced backwards, found my distance and lunged in at him. I guess I was thinking I was Bald Bull. Madman saw me coming and timed me perfectly. He hit me with a jab as soon as I was in range. My charge was stopped instantly, and I stood there staring at him stupidly. In that split second he reduced me from feeling like I owned the ring to wondering what the hell I was doing in there. He followed it up with three brutal hooks. I was defenseless in that moment, unsure of myself and scared. I pressed in and tied him up. He tried to push me away, but I just held on until the little, bald ref came in and separated us.

Madman came at me like...well, like a mad man. He came in and moved around me, stopping occasionally to hit me with a jab. I turned with him and ate the jabs as they

came in. My head was snapping with each blow, and I felt my health slowly diminishing. When he took a few steps back, I was relieved. I thought I was getting a break from the debilitating beating he was delivering. Then he came at me. His dark brown skin rippled with anticipation of the blow. His orange afro bobbed on his head, and his mouth was distorted into a smile-sneer hybrid. It came in slow motion, as if my memory banks couldn't handle the speed at which everything was happening. Yet I still couldn't do anything to stop the punch.

It was a straight right hand that caught me. I momentarily felt my face melt around his glove, and then my feet left the ground, and I literally flew backwards. I hit the ropes, and they flung me forward. I had images run through my mind of being clotheslined by Starman, or being thrown from the ring and having twenty seconds to get back in. Funny where your mind wanders during a fight. I tinkered with wrestling back in my youth. It was a chance encounter with King Slender that made me abandon that pursuit and dedicate my life to the skill of boxing.

I took a step off the rope and dropped to my knees. I curled into a fetal position and took a deep breath. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to just stay down.

Deep in my soul, I heard a rhythmic clicking sound. I couldn't explain it, but it was this clicking sound that drove me to raise myself off the canvas.

The ref was on the count of seven when I got up. In the big show, the ref is supposed to check you and make sure you're okay. Here in the Ring King tourney, he just sees that you are up and shouts, "Fight."

Maybe it was my ears ringing from the punch or maybe it was just the way the ref said it, but at the time it sounded like "Right."

I tried to ask him what that meant, but Madman was already upon me. He hit me with two quick jabs before

I even had a chance to comprehend anything. I quickly stepped in and tied him up before he had a chance to hit me again.

While we grappled there in the center of the ring, I had the perverse notion to twist Madman into a headlock and start biting into his skull like The Amazon once did against The Great Puma for the VWA Championship. The thought of suddenly turning this into a perverse wrestling match made me chuckle. The ref came in and separated us, and I was still laughing. Madman stared at me as if I was the crazy one. He stepped back, and I saw something new in his eyes. He was scared of me.

I jumped forward with a leaping uppercut and the blow caught him on the chin. My confidence soared back into me. He was backing away again, but it wasn't to run. No, he was making distance so that he could land another of his bombs. When the distance was just right, I seized the opportunity before he could. I landed another blistering uppercut.

He jabbed me twice and moved away. I looked at the large clock mounted on the wall. There was still fifteen seconds left in the round. That thought stumped me for a moment. Ring King rounds were only a minute long. Everything that had happened since the opening bell had happened in forty five seconds. While this thought sank in, Madman hit me with the first body blow of the fight. It was a painful punch, more painful than the one that put me on the canvas.

My eyes met his, and his fear was gone now. It was replaced with a rage, with fury.

Chapter 3

The Calming

I moved in to try and tie him up again, but he danced backwards out of my reach. I glanced at the clock. There was eight seconds left. Eight seconds. My mind hadn't even wrapped around that concept when he hit me. It was a brutal hook. I spun on my heels like a top and crumpled to the floor for the second time. And it was still the first round.

The world was a chaos of glitter and muffled shouts. I heard from somewhere in the nether world the ref counting. The numbers came in undecipherable grunts. I had no idea where his count was, but it didn't matter at that point, I was done. I was finished.

Then there were hands in my armpits helping me to my feet. I found myself looking into the face of my trainer. She helped me across the ring, and I saw the fans going haywire. I sat down heavily upon the stool and began to cry.

"I'm so sorry. I gave it as good as I could," I said.

"And you will give more," she told me.

"I can't," I said. "It's over."

"No it's not. You were saved by the bell."

I looked across the ring to see A. Madman smiling at me. I looked at the announcers who were as animated as ever. And I looked down at my trainer, who was squatting in front of me. It was only then that I realized that I had in fact not yet been knocked out.

"Can I win?" I asked her.

"You can win," she said. "You just need to relax."

I laughed. "You try relaxing while a psychopath knocks your head off."

She smiled at me as her hands massaged at my inner thighs. "I can relax you," she said.

Public displays of affection were forbidden through my Catholic upbringing, and maybe it was this that led to my prudishness.

I put my gloves down to stop her. She slapped my hands away and swallowed me. The crowd roared with pleasure. The announcers stood still for a moment, and then exploded into their animated chatter again.

I looked around the arena. Every eye in the place was on me and my trainer. Then I looked at Madman. He growled at me. He actually did, the crazy bastard growled. Then he grabbed one of his corner men and threw him to the canvas in front of him and ordered the young man to give him the same treatment that my trainer was giving me. When the young man did not act, Madman slapped him across the face. Then the man moved in, and did what he was told.

I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't. Here we were, in the final battle for the title of Ring King, and we were both being satisfied after the first round by our corners. Of course, his corner was forced, and mine did it despite my protests.

I relaxed against the ring post and enjoyed the sensations. The world slid from my mind. Thoughts of A. Madman and the Ring King tournament slid into background noise. All there was in that moment, that glorious moment, was me and my trainer. The wild cheers of the crowd fell to a dull hum in my ears. I grunted with satisfaction.

And, just like that, the peace was over. My trainer tucked me back away, wiped her chin and slid out of the ring. I sat up to protest. I was not yet finished, but the bell rang and Madman rushed towards me.

If the fight had been beaten out of me before, it was sucked out of me now. I cared little for trying to beat Madman, I only wanted to get back to the corner, back to my trainer. As soon as he was within reach, I stepped in

and tied him up, holding his arms to prevent him from hitting me. The ref stepped forward to break us. I stepped back and then stepped in again and tied him up again. As we wrestled in the middle of the ring the crazy bastard thrust his pelvis at me, and I felt the thump of his hard-on against mine.

This act of sexual aggression towards me, more than the punches to my face and body, more than his taunts, more than anything else, this made me hate him and want to hurt him.

Chapter 4

Balance

I shifted my weight and threw him off of me just as the ref stepped forward to break us. Madman was smiling at me. I threw a brutal uppercut at him, but he stepped back from it and hit me with a quick one-two, snapping my head back and bringing a trickle of blood from my nose.

I launched myself at him again. My head buzzed with rage, and the fury within me drove my fists recklessly towards Madman. The frustration was all consuming. My now flaccid penis throbbed in its protective cup. And my head throbbed in rhythm.

My hook went behind him as he stepped forward and caught me with a sharp uppercut. My knees buckled, and I took a step back. I swung wildly with a looping hook, but Madman landed two crisp jabs in my mug before my punch even finished its arc.

I could hear my trainer screaming at me to cover up, to jab, to hold, but I wanted only to tear the slimy shit's head off.

I threw an uppercut. It was stupid. He wasn't even in range for the uppercut. He came in quickly with an uppercut of his own, and I was knocked off my feet and flat on my ass.

I struggled to push my way back to my feet as the little ref counted into my face. I got to my feet, shook my head clear, and launched another uppercut. Madman used my recklessness against me. He held out a jab and allowed my momentum to be the force behind the blow. My face wrapped around his fist, and I went down again for the second time in a matter of seconds.

I was a little slower getting up this time. I glared at Madman and started to charge at him again when the bell

rang bringing an end to the second round. The ref had to step between us.

We stood there for a couple of seconds glowering at each other over the ref's head. My trainer stepped forward and grabbed me by the glove and pulled me back.

"What are you doing?" Her reprimand snapped me back to myself, reminded me of who I was and where I was. I could feel the blood pounding in my ears as my adrenaline slowly fell back to normal levels.

"I want to kill him," I said, despite not having that burning rage in me anymore.

"Clear your mind of that. Just focus on boxing him." Then she grabbed me by the waistband, and pulled. She held me in her hands and kissed me gently. I fell back against the turnbuckle the world slowly drained away.

I have always been somebody who could live in the moment. I never really concerned myself too much with the future. One day at a time. Why worry about paying the rent until the eviction crew arrives? That is the way my life has always been, that is what got me stuck in a sport that the media claimed has been dying since the forties, that is what has me fighting below the fringe of obscurity, and that is what had me getting my brains beat out through the first two rounds. However, there in that corner with my trainer kneeling before me, I was content with the direction I had chosen for my life.

I looked across the ring at Madman. His trainer was staying out of his reach, refusing to perform the act again. Madman was screaming at him while attempting to masturbate with his boxing gloves on. I couldn't help myself. I laughed at him. My laughter drew his attention. He stood in the corner and screamed at me.

My trainer pulled back a little and smiled up at me. I smiled back at her. "You got this guy," she said. "You may never be the next Little Mac, but you are the king. The Ring King."

Then she finished her work. She sucked the rage out of me, the fury, the indifference, the self-doubt, and the defeat. We were both panting afterwards, and she smiled at me again. A calming, energetic rush filled my head, and I knew then that I could win.

I looked up to see Madman standing on his stool with his erection on the top rope as he screamed at the crowd. I whistled sharply at him, and it drew his attention. I stood up in the corner.

The bell to start round three rang, but before I took the mouthpiece from my trainer I yelled to Madman. "I finished. Now you are finished." The look on his face was as clear as could be. He was terrified.

Chapter 5

The Turning

I came out in round three like a man possessed. I hit Madman with a quick one-two, moved ninety degrees around him and hit him with a nasty hook. He swung at me with a wild leaping punch but the range was all wrong and we ended up tying our arms around each other. He was growling at me when the ref broke us, but I didn't even pay attention to it. I dove in with a brutal straight right that sent him flying backwards. He bounced off the ropes, and I again thought of my brief stint in the Pro Wrestling circuit.

The ref counted and I was again aware of the rapid clicking sound that I could hear faintly over the roar of the crowd and the constant banter of the ringside announcers. Only now I knew what it was. I was able to reason through it.

The sound was Madman's guardian angel pulling the strings on his lifeline, drawing him back to his feet. The rhythm was constant and precise. And in that moment I wondered if I could possibly win. Then I looked at Madman and all doubts drained away.

He was not the untamable beast of my nightmares. He was a fellow punching bag, a palooka, a lummo. I felt a little sorry for him then, but not too sorry to hit him with three straight punches that he blocked with his ugly mug. He swung wildly at me, and the punch missed me by a few feet. I hit him with three more quick punches and I could tell he didn't have much left on his life meter.

I stepped back and he started to lunge at me. I moved around him and hit him with a sharp hook. I moved again and he charged me. I stuck him with a jab before he could get his punch in motion.

I stepped back, and the world went silent to me. Everything vanished in that instant. Nothing else mattered.

Everything was blissfully perfect. Truly, it was too perfect. Madman was hurt bad and moving slow. My distance was just right for an uppercut the likes that nobody has thrown since Mike Tyson. I felt as if I had a star punch or something. My feet didn't move, or at least I don't remember them moving as I launched towards him.

There was a split second where I thought he was going to step in and tie me up, but he didn't. My arm snapped upwards. His head jacked back and his feet left the ground. My eyes stayed on the canvas waiting, to see him fall.

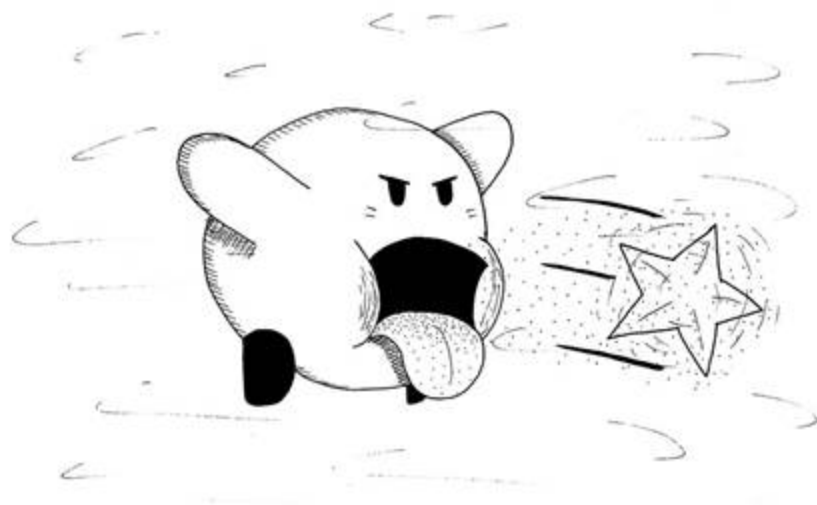
But he didn't land. I glanced up briefly to see his feet sailing into the crowd. No amount of string pulling from an unseen guardian angel could save him.

My hand was raised and a thousand pictures of me were taken with the Ring King belt around my waist. I posed and flexed for my fans. The announcers were going crazy about the fight.

I looked at my trainer and winked. She blushed and ran toward me. We kissed.

One of the announcers shouted to me, asking me who I wanted next.

I smiled at him. "I want Little Mac."



KIRBY'S ADVENTURE

by Chris Gomez

Chapter 1

The burning meteor descended upon the land with extreme fury. Faster and faster it fell, finally colliding with the ground, burning everything around it with even more extreme fire! A smirking figure emerged from the crater. He was Kirby, the in-your-face alien that was way cooler than Poochie and twice as tubular.

"Rough landings are rawhide!" said the bubblegum-colored punk alien kid, who noticed a freestanding door with the number one over it in the grassy meadow that surrounded him. Pumped for far-out, wicked sick action, he ran towards it with a flying jump kick to break down the door, which was cool, but would have been way cooler if he had a skateboard.

Kirby realized he was now in a completely different grassy meadow with giant yellow poles sticking out of it, and lots of weird looking monsters. It was okay though, because Kirby was one bad problem child, and knew what to do. He ran towards the dweebi-est of these monsters, a short red guy with one huge eyeball, unhinged his jaw, and swallowed this totally lame nerd of an enemy whole. Was the entire planet nothing but huge geeks? Kirby was determined to find out, because he was just that radical. Word-up.

Kirby noticed a cave off in the distance, and decided that if there was anybody who might be more surf's-up slammin' than he was, they would be in there. Kirby ran past monsters, and made sick wicked jumps over them, and then up over small hills that were in the way. While pushing his way past one buzz-kill nerdwad foe, a pulsing beam of laser energy erupted from his hand, scorching the monster into oblivion. Where once a living, breathing creature stood, a pile of impersonal ash now lay on the ground.

“RAD-TACULAR!” Kirby shouted as he proceeded to death-laser everything in his path. It must have been the effect of eating that first Earthling monster that somehow now granted his alien physiology extraordinary powers. Indeed, these new powers increased his street-to-the-extreme cred potential to a most triumphant apex. Surely whatever lay in the cave would be no match for his jammin’ out-of-this-world space kaboom.

When Kirby entered the cave, he was confronted by a dead-eyed, grinning elf who was busy b-boying on his frozen piece of cardboard. As Kirby burst in, hot surging to give the North Pole street punk some major dead-damage, the break dancing monster stopped mid-headspin, and backflipped up on to his feet.

“Yo I heard you killin’ but I was just chillin’. Poppy Bro is my name, and I know you the villain!” the dancing monster rapped at Kirby. The pink alien badass frowned hard at his opponent; he was a raditude slam-slasher to be sure, but was that enough?

Was Kirby bebop bomb-diggity wack-daddy enough to step up to this level of stunting?

“Santa must-a called you in sick, ‘cuz you ain’t the first pick! I’m the nerd blastin’ winner, and I’ll have you for dinner! Poppy Bro in the cave? More like Poppy Bro IN YOUR GRAVE!”

He was. By God in Heaven, he was.

Poppy then pulled a bomb from behind his back and threw it at Kirby! Kirby did a dodge roll that was totally boss.

“Heh. Not that your dynamite is gonna give me the dyna-fright, but where’re you getting those bombs from anyway?” Kirby jeered at his opponent while firing off a quick succession of beams from his hand laser.

“I’m loony toonin’ on you, ‘cuz you takin’ out the trash! Burst a boom blast, and knock out yo ass!” Poppy Bro replied, and then jumped high in the air, and threw one

gigantic bomb toward Kirby. This was it. It was now or nirvana, and Kirby wasn't about to smell like teen spirit. He held out his arm and readied a major dose of bodacious beam-blasting power.

"Your blast...is in the PAST!"

Kirby's hand beam pierced through Poppy Bro's mega-bomb, then blasted through Poppy Bro's head, killing him instantly. Kirby turned around and smirked as the bomb exploded spectacularly. He would have then slowly walked away from the explosion, but the cave they had been fighting in began to collapse! He had to think fast; it would be a crime against nature itself if such a street cool gnarly rad problem child were to be taken from us here. Luckily Kirby's wicked bad life would be saved! He found a skateboard propped up against the cave wall, grabbed it, and threw it down on the ground. Kirby tricked hard for some serious sick speed, as the cave walls shook around him and the column of fire from the bomb blast chased after him. It was so close, the flames were licking his back!

"You're flamin' on my flight for daylight!" he shouted as the cave entrance drew closer and closer, but the heat kept coming!

"But when the going gets tough, the fierce get fearsome, and you either flounder..." The home stretch was upon him! A boulder fell in front of him, forming a perfect ramp, and Kirby skated up it and...

"OR FLAME OUT!!!"

Kirby burst forth from the cave entrance, executing a perfect kick-flip as the entire cave exploded in a gargantuan fireball that was only made more impressive by how sick skate-skitchin' that kick-flip was. Kirby knew it was a far-out flawless kick-flip and that his quest, his destiny, was to share its radical awesomeness to the rest of whoever lived on this strange planet. He saw a Pizza Hut off in the distance, and knew a triumphant slice of 'za was in order.

Chapter 2

Pizza. The black shades of Italian cuisine. The food that put the “Y” in “Wyld Stallynz.” Kirby kicked the door of The Hut open, smirked, and snapped his fingers. The air in the room became electric with his raditude cool time.

“Hey Sparky! Let’s get some serious dough on the flow, am I right? Big mad whuppings!” he said to the cashier, who was not named Sparky, and had no idea what Kirby was talking about.

“Uh, sir, I don’t understand. Would you like to order a pizza?” he asked with an appropriate puzzlement. Kirby’s badass smirk soured into a scowl that was actually even more badass and radical. This dork-stain was going to get it coming!

“Get some cheese in this hole, pizza-face, or you’re gonna have to be kind and rewind,” he threatened obliquely. The cashier thought it was a good idea to give him a pizza and not ask any more questions.

With pizza in hand, Kirby spied a crane-catcher machine, and knew he had to prove his most triumphant baditude by winning at it. He did an inverted 360-degree spin-jump over to the machine, pressed its start button, and leaned in hard to the right, directing the machine’s mechanical arm toward the far corner. His other hand wildly ripped a slice of pizza off from its plate neighbors, stretching gooey cheese and pepperoni in a zigzag.

“No half-shells here, slim-dim daddy!” he bragged, and then whipped the joystick a solid three-quarter turn down, bulls-eyeing the mechanical claw over a *Biker Mice From Mars* doll, the only fitting prize for the universe’s most strato-spherical alien hero child. Kirby jumped high into the air and came down with a smash on the button marked GRAB, using all of his bodacious power.

“SLAM-JAM!!!” he screamed as the claw opened, descended down, and successfully grabbed the toy. Kirby kicked off the machine and break danced. One more win for the in the can for kickin’. As the doll dropped down into the machine’s receiving trough, Kirby noticed a small human child, dumbstruck at how gnarpocoliptically awesome this strange, pink alien dude with the ’tude was. Kirby smirked over his shoulder at the young boy.

“Here kid.” He tossed the anthropomorphic rodent doll to the boy, who gawked at it in awe.

“Whoa, awesome!” the child marveled.

“Dope the towns out, kid. Tell ’em they got a board strip-trip on the way,” Kirby coolly told the kid as he sauntered out the door. The boy had absolutely no clue what that meant, but it probably had something to do with the way that, from beyond the front window of that now hallowed Pizza Hut, Kirby threw down his bitchin’ bad skateboard and rode off to parts unknown.

Chapter 3

Fresh off catching a rad cool slice of Pizza Hut pizza, Kirby jammed out across the checker-boarded landscape on his splittin' skateboard. But this was no ordinary skateboard, you dorkwad. Kirby had a bodacious slammin mondo blitzer board that went faster the harder he smirked. Kirby spied some new enemies off in the distance; strange floating black pogs with eyes and spikes on them bouncing up and down between the ground and blocks that floated above them. Kirby threw down his skateboard, jumped on it, smirked so hard he could pop the tab on a fresh cold cool can of Mountain Dew and made way toward the punked-out pog-men.

"If you're only as good as your board..." Kirby began as he sped forward across the green and tan landscape, toward the first right-angled precipice of its geometric landscape, readying himself for a mad plasmic kick-flip over the pog monster and its block. "...then my board is roached up the off dunk!" he finally exclaimed after a 360-degree kick flip through the space between the pog baddy and the floating block that was so master b-ball, the aforementioned enemy exploded in deference to Kirby's disaster dude 'tude.

Kirby was about to fire off another flawless skate trick, but then he noticed bullets coming his way! He improvised a butter flip ollie to dodge out of the way, and realized that the bullets were actually cannon balls from pirate cannons! With that impetuous smirk on his face and the flavor of Mountain Dew in his heart, Kirby dashed his skateboard forward, and goofy-footed across the barrel of one of the pirate cannons, Godzilla-flipped into a nose grind past the next two, and finally smashed into the final cannon barrel's opening, plugging its ball inside and causing it to explode into total cleat meat.

Kirby tricked off many more sick wit, mad jam techniques on his blitzer board, and felt his point score increasing exponentially, the power of his hand laser increasing as well. He pushed off the ground, holding his laser hand down as its charge grew in power, until it shone with unimaginable lethal might. Kirby saw a gauntlet of wack monsters in his way as he began to ascend the mountain that lay at the end of the strange valley. With his mad dopin' death doom ready to rock the clock out, he threw his blitz board into the most mondo 360 spin whip that had ever whipped or spun in the history of skateboards.

"TUBE-TACULAR!!!" Kirby screamed as he unleashed the full force of his killing laser, incinerating every ounce of flora and fauna that lay before him. As the ground sloped up, the force of his prodigious particle-beam power propelled him to the mountain's apex. When he catapulted up to the top of the mountain, he threw his board over him and performed the most ultimate mega-max power skill skateboard trick ever, as everything behind him exploded. It was supremely radical to say the absolute, bare minimum.

As he came down from this greatest of all freestyle runs, he saw a forest off in the distance. He knew that whatever lay inside the dense foliage, it was going to have to make way for the krown kombat king of awesome.

Chapter 4

Kirby skateboarded into the forest until the brambles and roots from the trees that surrounded him became too thick to continue. He kicked up his board and strapped it to his back, then looked around with a quizzical smirk and raised eyebrow, wondering where all the dorkwad monsters could be.

Before he could vocalize a call to who or whatever might be listening with a quip that would surely have been megaton bad ass, a strange polar bear wearing black overalls rushed him down! Kirby was knocked off his feet and was hurt pretty badly, but was still really cool-looking while he tumbled back and hit a tree. He groaned in pain, shook his head to regain his bearings, and then stared down his new opponent.

"Looks like Lil' Abner just left the deep freeze, so I hope you're ready for the high ballin' heat wave!" Kirby said. He tried to fire his hand laser, but it shorted out!

Kirby felt a distinct loss of power, and knew he had to find a monster to eat soon, or else he wouldn't be able to defend himself and he might die, or, worse, look totally lame. To the left of the tree he saw a weird fireball creature with eyes and a Q*bert snout. Q*bert was super old and lame and not cool like Kirby, so he felt no compunction or remorse about jumping the weird nerd-face monster, swallowing him whole, and gaining his burn bad blammin' fire powers. Feeling a resurgence in his raditude, Kirby dash-turned back to the polar bear, ready to rip the run down. Word-up, yo!

"Time for the coldest burn you'll ever know, you jacked-up jack attack!!" said Kirby as he inhaled deeply, and then exhaled a gargantuan fireball, incinerating the polar bear monster instantly.

Kirby then jumped into the tops of the forest's canopy and leaped from tree to tree, showing off his rockin' rad gymnasti-jam skills. Kirby was feeling especially radical, but then he was knocked down out of the tree branches by a shadowy figure, darting back and forth! Who could it have been? There was no time to figure that out, because Kirby realized he was facing down a giant living tree monster! It stared at him with dead eyes, and he could feel the abyss behind those empty, black cavities.

"You sayin' my apples aren't what they oughta be?" croaked the strange tree monster before plucking some of them from his tall branches with his lower branch-hands, and throwing them at the pink alien! Kirby dodged the apples, and tried to think of the perfect one-liner to finish off this enemy with. After a few more apple throws, he had it!

"You're getting too close there, cracker barrel, so how about we put up a firewall with this FIRE BALL!!!!"

He blew a gargantuan flame blast toward the evil tree baddie, engulfing him in a curtain of burning orange and red death. Kirby continued to blow fire and spin around, igniting and incinerating everything around him. In minutes, the flip-trippin' hero had immolated the entire forest. Surveying the destruction, Kirby was well satisfied by his work. He smirked gloriously.

"The ultimate scratch n' sniff...and the smell is victory."

He threw down his skateboard, and rolled off into the distance.

Chapter 5

Kirby skated out of the smoldering remains of the lush, verdant forest, and found himself on a cliff that overlooked the seemingly boundless, gloriously blue ocean. He stopped, kicked up his skateboard, and stared at it for a moment. And then, as he realized what he must do next, to further prove his absolute mastery over all things rad, cool, tubular, bodacious, gnarly, and awesome, he ripped the wheels off his skateboard.

"I'm not just about blastin' nerds into turds!" Kirby exclaimed to himself. He backed up with his now wheel-less skateboard, and sprinted toward the cliff, and jumped off! But this was no suicide. The only suicide for a bad packin' awesome-lord like Kirby was a 7-11 big gulp made of all the flavors of Mountain Dew. This was the start of a new paradigm. The beginning of a whole new form of rad-cool that could not have been conceived of until this moment.

Kirby threw the skateboard down on to the water and began to surf. He whipped the wake out and smirked hard, riding the choppin' waves like a ride-hard chop-blocker, and surfed out for miles, never losing his control of his board or the waves. Kirby proved himself the most gnarpocolyptic ninja surf-inator in the history of the world. It was cool. He was cool. Really cool.

Eventually Kirby found an island cave, and decided to explore it so that he could show whatever dweeb-stick loser-faces were inside that he was the coolest thing to ever slick out the wake waters.

In the dark, quiet cavern, Kirby's mind began to wander as he explored the subterranean depths of the island. It reminded him of Poppy Bro. Thinking about that dancin' rappin' elf-kid made Kirby realize that he was pretty cool. It was almost a tragedy that Kirby had to waste his ice. Was there some other way? Could they have fought

together? A Bill to his Ted? A Butt-head to his Beavis? *No*, Kirby thought to himself. *I've got the rad in my bad and nobody can keep me from showing this world, and every other solar system, that I'm the most mad-tastic awesome-tude dude ever to live.*

Just then, a monster baddie got the drop on Kirby! It was a weird new enemy that flapped its wings and smiled gormlessly, but as he recovered from the blow, Kirby noticed its face morphing into a horrible, bat-like grimace, bearing down on him, gnashing and chomping its long, blood-soaked jaw.

Kirby gritted his teeth as his eyes darted from side to side; he could feel that he had lost his fire-breathing ability, but there were no other monsters to eat in this part of the cave! He realized that to finish off this knife-mouthed baddie, he was going to have to pull a desperate maneuver.

Kirby crouched down and locked eyes with the bat monster. He waited as it descended upon him, letting it draw closer and closer. Finally, when the beast was just about to chow down, Kirby threw his feet forward, and executed a dashing slide-kick that smashed through the monster's body, tearing him in half, causing him to explode majestically. Kirby smirked; the most ultimate revenge low kick in the history of ever was his.

It was time to find a new power though, because not every baddie he would encounter could be worthy of the baddest of low slide kicks. Fortunately, Kirby found a new kind of monster he'd never seen before: a spinning metal top, which he quickly ate. He felt himself gain the ability to transform his body into a psyched out cyclone!

Kirby could see that the cave could be exited up a giant shaft, and threw himself into tornado form to bounce up the walls and make his way out.

"Spin the twin twist 'tude, dude, 'cuz it's the time for mine to shine!" he quipped as a furious flurry of air currents surrounded the rough rockin' alien hero's pink

body, and he proceeded to slip-shot crossfire ping-pong up the cave walls.

When he had finally ascended to its peak, he saw that he was once more close to the ocean, and off in the distance another island! With a Pizza Hut! He threw down his surfboard and sick-surfed off, determined to get some much needed 'za.

Chapter 6

Kirby was maxin' out, chillaxin' all cool, enjoying a sick slice of totally sweet pizza, when a strange figure approached him. He was short and round, like Kirby, but wore a thick brown coat that was worn and tattered near the edges, and he had a similarly worn looking wide-brimmed hat that looked totally bad ass. Kirby sat up at attention; he knew that someone wearing a trench coat was most likely worth taking seriously because of how cool he was. He tore another bite from his pizza slice and greeted the stranger.

"You look like you've got a bone to pick, and this thug's got some harmony." Kirby smirked.

"Listen closely, warrior from another world. You have set into motion something that can never be undone. Your destiny is to see this quest through, and that evil be vanquished," the strange figure gravely intoned. Kirby shrugged and smirked with the other side of his mouth.

"I'm not the chosen one, homie. Just the slickest, wickedest, blast bustin' dude in this or any other cosmos."

"Perhaps you think so now, great warrior, but know this: soon you shall be confronted with a mirror twin of your darkest impulses. He is your shadow made flesh, and though he is formidable, he is but a servant of an even more fearsome tyrant. Beware the Fowl King, Kirby. The choice shall soon be yours to face them and restore peace and justice to this land, or to let it suffer and wither in darkness."

The grave figure turned around, his coat fanning out, making him look totally rad. As he walked toward the door, leaving Kirby to finish his 'za, the pink alien asked him a final question.

"You got a name, bad news dude?"

"You may call me...Waddle Dee."

Chapter 7

After he finished noshing on that sick sweet 'za, Kirby left the Pizza Hut and returned to surf the jam-jettin' waves. He used his tornado power to stir up a psycho-sick-twist tsunami wave to flash flip his board and increase his speed to max mach levels of awesome. Eventually Kirby surfed across the ocean far enough to find a new beach, where a group of living wheel enemies were grinding out bomb diggity speed and racing along the beach! Kirby could see that they were cool, and a group of worthy challengers to further prove his wicked wild whup ass blastin' baditude. He surfed to shore and was greeted by a chorus of hostile engines revving.

"This is *our* gang's territory, dweeb! You better pack that board back up and make your way out, because the road is *our* bride!" one of the wheelies threatened.

"No way, nerd! I think you guys are the ones who're gonna have to hit the road, because wherever I may roam, I'm in Rome, and not only am I your Caesar..." Kirby retorted, then held his skate-surfboard with both hands, and bashed one of the wheelie baddie gang, breaking his body into a million mechanical fragments. "...AND YOUR SANDMAN!!!"

Kirby threw himself into a tornado blast as the wheelies circled him, huge jets of fire bursting from their engine headers. The leader of the wheelie gang called out to his comrades. "BURN HIM BOYS! HOT, LOOSE, AND CLEAN!"

The wheelies increased their speed, lowering their angle, and attempted a controlled collapse to capture Kirby in a circle of exhaust flame, but it wasn't enough! Kirby's tornado spin deflected the flame harmlessly skyward, where it plumed into a bad ass black cloud of flame. Kirby, who had been propelled skyward by his tight trick trippin'

tornado technique, descended from the flame cloud, landing on one of the wheelies, and wrestled him into a collision course with one of his fellow baddies!

"I got the fuel, you've got the fire, SO HERE'S THE DESIRE!" Kirby shouted with the sharp witted baditude of a jacked up junkie devil child.

"OH GOD NO!!!" screamed the wheelies as they slammed together, exploding spectacularly and Kirby back flipped off to safety. There was only one tire-treadin' baddie left for Kirby to finish off, but before he could quench the death-thirst with his gasoline, the beach was engulfed in a gargantuan sandstorm! Kirby could barely see a few inches in front of him. He noticed that the sandstorm seemed to be compressing, focusing down, until it was a single, potent cylinder of wind and sand. The remains of the final member of the wheelie gang lay strewn about, but Kirby's attention was fixed on the sandstorm tornado as it stopped suddenly, all of its contents dispersing away from the eye of the storm, revealing a short, masked figure, who was bedecked in shoulder pads, all covered with ragged, jagged spikes, and a massive, tattered cape, flowing with chains.

"Don't think I won't ship you out, show off!" Kirby quipped. The menacing figure brandished a jagged sword that was similarly covered in chains and spikes.

"You! Survivor! Learn my story and know that it is the herald of your doom! Like you, I came from a distant world! The same world! But I did not survive the journey! As my body burned from the caress of this world's atmosphere and life left flesh, my spirit was given a choice: return to the mortal world and serve a new master! The Fowl King! I am the deathless warrior of vengeance! The general of the Fowl King's army! I am Meta Knight!"

Meta Knight whipped his sword forward, throwing it toward Kirby. Kirby dove out, and barrel dodge rolled, but Meta Knight was faster than any foe Kirby had faced before, and closed in for a killing blow! Kirby grabbed a

piece of wheelie bumper that lay beside him and blocked Meta Knight's slashing blade, but only just barely!

"You're the toughest jerky I've seen so far! What really makes a fresh prince like you tick, anyway?" Kirby sneered at Meta Knight.

"You are no creature of light, Kirby! Waddle Dee is a fool to believe in you!! I have seen into your mind, your motivations, your very soul! You care nothing for this world and its creatures! It is my sworn duty to the Fowl King to protect his domains, and you defile them all! Your sins are plain to me!! YOU BURNED THAT ENTIRE FOREST TO THE GROUND, KILLING EVERYTHING THAT LIVED IN IT!"

As the vengeful warrior ranted and accused him, Kirby grabbed a section of the chain that hung off his cape, wrapped it around his hand, and gave Meta Knight a pre-emptive victory smirk.

"Yeah but it was totally rad." Kirby replied flippantly, then activated his tornado power and began to spin Meta Knight at such hyper-speed spastic velocity that he rose higher and higher into the air. Finally, Kirby let go of the demon warrior's chain, flinging him skyward! Kirby leapt into the air after his foe, grabbed him by the back of his head, and exerted all of his power and weight onto Meta Knight's spinning body.

"You might have died from the fall, Meta Knight, but know you're my b-ball! I'm going in for a serious slam dunk, and it's time for you to get ready for a double dealin' dose of DEAD!!"

Kirby shouted triumphantly as he slammed Meta Knight into the ground, the force and speed of the impact causing an explosion so massive that it was followed by a mushroom cloud visible from space. After a few brief moments, Kirby emerged from the crater that would serve as Meta Knight's final resting place. Surveying the now glass landscape, Kirby tucked his board under his arm and

began to walk forward. He had a new mission now: to find Waddle Dee, and learn more about this mysterious, though probably totally wack geek-dweeb, the Fowl King.

Chapter 8

Across the blasted desert landscape, Kirby trudged, holding his skateboard under his arm. He had tried sand-surfing, and while it was mad-black jack bad ass for about ten minutes, it was simply too difficult to keep the momentum going. The brutal sun beat down upon him, sapping his alien pink body of vital energy. If only he had a crisp, kickin' bottle of Mountain Dew to put the dip-down devil fire in his veins he knew he needed. Mountain Dew would slick the sweat from his brow and get him juiced to cut rip ridin' loose. If only he could find a Pizza Hut soon, but as he walked on, he passed only ruins of long dead civilizations, and eventually the ruins became more frequent. Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns lined the broken stone paths.

Suddenly, Kirby heard the diesel-pushing rev of a hateful engine. From behind a circle of collapsed ruins, a new wheelie baddie gang emerged! They glared down at the pink alien problem child, but their glares would be no match for his slick skitchin' smirk. "We heard you wasted our gang-brothers. You're gonna pay, punk!"

"This punk's not pushin'! You're about to go hardcore up the straights, edge!" The wheelies rushed him, but Kirby, the anti-hero to surpass all others, was ready for them. He flipped his board up, and managed to throw it forward a wicked split spin, impaling two of the wheelies on the board's skating trucks! The wheelies screamed in confusion and agony, their gang-mates stopping short to see what was wrong, but that was one bad mistake to make.

"Incoming killer slicks for a bad blood kick!" Kirby shouted at the two other wheelies and performed a sliding low kick to both of them that was so bad ass and cooler than anything you could hope to do. The mechanical

monsters where propelled at a tremendously bodacious force forward, and impaled on the two remaining skateboard trucks. The wounded monsters writhed in hateful pain, but no hip hater-trader could match Kirby's killin' kid cool. He jumped on the board, grabbed a pair of black sunglasses from the ground, and smirked triumphantly.

"It's time to return for the rad-ride to rip it. Let's get wreckin'." Kirby said, and pushed off, setting off his skateboard, at long last reborn, into motion.

Chapter 9

Kirby rolled hard on his blitzed out mondo bad board through the ancient Greek ruins, eventually happening on the remains of a coliseum! He tricked off his board, holding it under his arm, walked into the half-destroyed theater of bloody death, and thought to himself how cool he could have been if he had lived in an age where he would have rip-tooled all the warriors into total burst-smash death spins. He would have been the sickest, boom-doom-est gladiator that could have ever lived. When Kirby paused from thinking about how awesome and cool he could have been in ancient history, he noticed a weird, dweeby little nerd kid sitting on a stool in the center of the fighting arena...drawing comic books?! What a ultra-max-dweeb! Kirby strutted up to the lame-o, smirked wickedly, and readied a blast-kickin' quip.

"What a king-ding dork-off! You're in here drawing comics? Dip-down dumb, dude!" Kirby smirked even harder with satisfaction at his insult inferno, but the youth was hardly blown away.

"I have come to study the remains of this people's art, simpleton! The ancient Greeks venerated and glorified perfection of the physical body, and it is only appropriate to look to them to guide and direct my art!" he snottily replied. Kirby wasn't about to let some dumb dipstick to put up a fight against him! He was way too cool!

"Read my lips, crumb-bum back-track! Drawing. Is. Lame!"

"You know nothing, fool! The comic book is no longer for children! The world has finally come to recognize the brilliant darkness, grim maturity, and gritty sophistication of the graphic novel! The comic book is strong, as strong as

the muscles of such flawless and mighty heroes as the Young Bloods, and the X-Treme X-Vengers!"

"Whatever, geek-puss, you're goin' down!"

"I think not, bloody-minded fool!" The boy slapped his hands down on the two hyper-detailed paintings of ultra-muscled mercenary warriors on his canvases, and they burst forth from their containment into the world!

"Alright, time to wreck the 'roids!" Kirby ran toward the macho-muscled monsters and, after throwing down his jam blam mondo blitzer skateboard, savagely skated between their legs. Kirby noticed that for all the bulging muscle tissue they had, the living drawings had the most fragile ankles and feet he had ever seen! It was time to mix-master jam the old with the new, and show these dump-trumpin' fools what it meant to have such an Achilles' heel.

"Blip bam the man, wack hacker!" Kirby sneered in a really cool tone of voice as he dashed his board toward one of the enemy warriors, who brandished a preposterously large laser gun that featured three primary firing barrels, six eye-sights and three times that many ammo belts hanging from its body, but Kirby tricked his skateboard forward, and spun a devil's due kickflip 360 spin on one of the illustrated warrior's ankles, causing him to lose balance and wave the fire arm wildly, the sparkling green column of plasma energy erupting from the cannon's muzzle, incinerating priceless ruins of the long abandoned city-state. Kirby was about to hip-hit it and pull a u-turn to the other enemy, a beefed-up-bad-blown ninja fighter with a gleaming sword, but the comic book drawing kid rolled hard-fast into Kirby, and elbow checked him! The kid was wearing roller blades! Kirby smirked in grudging respect; if this kid was on roller blades, which were pretty fantastically rad-sick, maybe he wasn't such a horrible dweeb after all.

"Beat-speedin' blades, kid!" Kirby shouted as the youthful artist regrouped alongside his animate creation.

"I believe it's time you do as Todd McFarlane, the greatest of all living comic creators, did to Marvel, and leave!"

"Not a chance, nerd-piece! I'm about to hack you off the hip-hop!" The pink alien bad child skated up an outcropping of rubble, and jump-tricked some trick-jumps into the air. His speed was five-point-harness-fast. His slam was jam. He played it loud. He liked to drink Mountain Dew. He could win.

The mammoth comic book battler brandished his sword at Kirby furiously as the bad-ball of hip-hype descended upon his skateboard from the air on to the giant warrior. Kirby angled downward at just the right angle and grinded along the ninja's sword edge! Radical sparks flew radically out, showering down, until finally the skateboard's trucks caught on the hilt. Kirby made a bad ass leap off the board, over the ninja warrior's head, grabbed his whippin' long pony tail with both hands, and pulled him hard to the ground, incapacitating him totally. Then Kirby stared down the comic book kid, and his skateboard fell back into his hands from the air, which was totally cool. Kirby smirked.

"You and me, little dude: one ride down, face first, face-off!" Kirby challenged the adolescent boy.

"A game of chicken then! I suppose I could humor an impudent fool such as yourself!" The two wheeled warriors dashed back to far sides of the half-demolished arena, and got ready for the ultimate rolling duel of ride-hard rippin' speed! After what felt like an eternity of smirked-out stare-downs, they blasted forward, rolling faster and faster, their velocities hyping higher and higher for the ultimate dash-crash. Kirby noticed the roller-bladder struggling to hold it together as they came toward each other, but Kirby was ridin' up alright. Beads of sweat slicked off the roller-blading boy's forehead as they came closer to each other, approaching the sound barrier! It was too much!

“AAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” the boy screamed as he exploded in a fiery napalm ball of blast flame. Kirby slid through the smoke and embers and skitch-stopped hard on his board. He was about to smirk to himself, when he noticed, atop one of the few standing columns, an ominous figure. Utterly massive in its girth, the foreboding figure was wrapped in a demonically jagged, yet somehow regal, blood red coat. Its face was that of some sort of carrion bird, feathers the sickly blue of dead flesh, and its sharp, pale beak curving downward in a hateful arc. It stared intensely at Kirby, who tried his best to be unperturbed. Before Kirby could hard whip a mean quip, the demon-bird let forth a horrible roaring squawk that began dark and low, and rose higher and higher in pitch, eventually becoming ear-splittingly unbearable. Kirby couldn’t help cover his ears and close his eyes. When the shrieking avian death rattle finally subsided, Kirby opened his eyes to see that the profanely glorious monster was gone.

Kirby thought back to Waddle Dee and Meta Knight. Both of them had mentioned someone called the Fowl King. Was that him? Kirby knew the only way to know for sure was to press on, so he threw down his jam-dam skateboard and rode on, ready to find the next dweebenheimer to throw down a to-the-max hack attack on.

Chapter 10

As Kirby rode on through the Greek ruins on his bitchin' bad slam-out mondo blitzer skateboard, he slowly but surely noticed something strange. Where once the ruins of buildings appeared to be those of third century Greek city-states, they now began to resemble medieval European castles! Kirby smirked to himself and thought about what a weird history these Earthlings had. They weren't all bad though, whatever humans were responsible for Pizza Hut and Mountain Dew were undoubtedly rip rack crack attack dudes who were hip and cool and on the bleeding edge of the core of hard. These old ruins though kept reminding him that at one time, however, humans were so dorky and lame! He thanked whatever metaphysical force was responsible for the passage of time. Without it there would never have come the 90s, the most hard-rad blip-trip decade to ever occur. It was a zeitgeist that was more home to him than any world he had traveled to. And glory, glory hallelujah, it would never end.

Eventually Kirby spotted an old castle that was infested with monsters! At last, a new place to smash-smack all the nerd-herds. He skateboarded across its drawbridge and bashed through the trick-twit enemies that stood in his way. He ramped up the high-hit extreme and busted through to fight the king of the castle! He was a giant clock monster with a thoroughly waxed mustache that let Kirby know that this foe would be totally lame and not cool.

"I say, foul cretin! You've advanced upon the throne of Fowl King's Duke der Chronologos! Your fool's errand ends here!" The Duke tried throwing a hard punch at Kirby, but the bad-track alien cool kid dodged under his fist! Kirby was about to smirk and fire off a quip at the nerd noble's

way, but found himself slammed to the ground by Chronologos' second punch!

Kirby staggered, his eyes darting back and forth in an attempt to find a monster whose ability he could gain by eating him. He found a strange green armored knight with a sword, and started droppin' the chomps all on top of the enemy.

"Nay, commoner! I am the last of my line, with no kin, nor child to call my own!" cried the knightly creature, but Kirby needed to tail-trip it fast into the blade-trade. His enemy consumed, he now had the ability to summon and brandish a sword! Kirby held the blade out to Chronologos threateningly. Time to dip the trip-trap!

"Orange you glad you're not a banana? 'Cuz here comes..."

The Duke bounded toward Kirby, his fists ready to smash the pink problem into a bubblegum stain, but Kirby leaped into the air! His sword, powered with the force of a thousand raditudes slashed with totally radical power through the Duke's body, radically cleaving him in radical half with one radical slice.

"...THE SPLIT!" Kirby finished, and smirked victoriously. The Duke's body fell, cleaved in half by the Milky Way's most cool-to-the-max alien. And yet, the Duke croaked out a single dying utterance to the hack-bad, bad ass brat.

"The...90s...will end...some day...boy..."

Kirby turned around at this horrible, unthinkable lie, and had no choice for what to do next. He threw down his sword, swallowed the remains of Duke der Chronologos, and felt the extraordinary power of his energy surge through him! It surged extremely, almost as extremely as a can of Surge soda, which was more extreme than a hundred cases of even the purest Mountain Dew. Extreme power radically radiated from every inch of Kirby's body,

and his vengeance was ready to blast out and play it hard-proud and rad-loud!

“EXTREME!” Kirby shouted with the fury of a raging storm! The castle walls shook before the sonic assault. “TUBULAR!!” He screamed with the strength of a furious god, and the castle began to tremble down to its foundations. “RADICAL!!!” Kirby roared with the raging fury of a thousand exploding universes and the entire castle crumbled spectacularly under the extreme duress of such a tubular attack of sonic destruction.

Kirby threw down his skateboard and pushed off toward a window, smashing through its glass as the collapsing building began to bury all of its remaining inhabitants. Kirby smirked hard. Nobody gets to mess with *this* bad jam rip-hitter!

Chapter 11

Kirby felt the barbed jaws of his enemy clamp down along his body. It was a tight spot, but not extreme tight, or even radical tight. The giant purple beetle monster that fought him was one real mean gene, but Kirby knew he could beat the beast with a real rockin' screwjob to the face! Kirby head-butted his dweeb-tastic foe, sending him into a confused daze, and radically back-flipped out of the monster's clutches!

Kirby thought back to how far he'd come to fight this bogus bug. After chill cool skating away from the ruins of the last castle, he spied a giant stone tower off in the distance, but unlike all the other abandoned castles around him, this one exuded a palpable aura of malevolent purpose and vengeful hate. It must have something to do with the Fowl King, and Kirby was ready to get back at him for making him look so lame and nerdy. He skate-backed hard to the immense structure, and bad-boarded up its many layers until he was half-way to the top! At the mid-point chamber, Kirby was confronted by a giant purple beetle monster who was ready to wrestle him down, federation-style!

"I'm the ultimate wrestler! The Fire Pro! And what'cha gonna do brother when the Fire Pro and his pyromaniacs run wild all over you?"

He made his first attack on the pink alien bad kid, but now, after that sick head butt, Kirby was poised to gain the upper hand! He rip-rushed a hard-dash up to the stunned monster, leaped into the air and, while twisting himself on to his back, grabbed the beetle dude's pincers and slammed him down cold on to the stone, his carapace cracking violently in the process. He was killed nearly instantly, and Kirby sneered out a totally bad ass attitude smirk.

“You’ve just got your jock shocked! Nobody degenerates my generation nation! Bad blood on the heel!” Kirby swallowed the corpse of the wrestling beetle and felt his body-slammin’ ’tude power max-up strong, jabroni!

Chapter 12

Kirby climbed higher and higher through the dark tower, pile-driving and Irish-whipping wack-weak monsters every step of the way, until eventually he reached the fearful top of the spire, where a familiar tattered red cape covered in spikes and chains billowed in the wind. Kirby was almost aghast, if that was a thing Kirby wasn't already too cool to do. Meta Knight, somehow or other, was alive?!

"What's a short dead dude like you doin' here for the heavy metal?" Kirby smirked to the revived evil warrior.

"I have returned, foolish child! Death's hold wanes like the fading moon, and with all Hell's doors open, we return now by the beckoning of the Fowl King! For, behold! I have multiplied my power across bodies, three-fold!" Meta Knight bellowed forth and flung open his cape, revealing he was surrounded by a complement of combat clones! To his left stood a bizarre mutant version of the undead warrior that had six arms, and could use them to walk and climb like a spider! To his right, a burly, muscle-bound version of Meta Knight with cyborg technology on his face and arms.

"Annihilation is upon you!" the three Meta Knights threatened as they ran toward the alien cool kid. This might have been scary for some nerd-noid-nobody, but Kirby was on the lock stop to shock-pop these undead dweebs! He dodged a heavy hard metal punch from the cyborg clone, dipping behind him, grabbing him by the torso, and broke the clone's back over his knee!

"I'm not in the mood for this fight tonight!" Kirby smirked as he dove between the arms of his gnarly nemesis' spider-clone, and threw all of his strength into another back-breaking crack-attack! "Knocking out some bane-bad for the last issue!" Kirby quipped and, after dodging the final Meta Knight's furious flurry of spike power doom-death, managed to grab a final hold of the

original killer combatant. With a mixed-mad mercilessness you can only get when you throw a dark knight down with no crash pad, he snapped Meta Knight's spinal cord in half! "Time for the knight fall, for all y'all!" The last main event for the gothic trio of dark knights had ended.

Chapter 13

Kirby knelt down next to the now paraplegic Meta Knight who he had just pop-dropped into the burst bubble.

"Alright geek-streak, where's your bird-boss? I gotta show him I'm hard-hipped to skitch his skates!" Meta Knight weakly looked up to Kirby and met his eyes.

"My Lord and Master, the glorious Fowl King, will never fall before you...but if you must throw yourself into his wrath so foolishly...he has made way to the new world, to America, to conquer its lands and peoples. Travel to him and die by his might, pathetic child."

But before Kirby could leave the tower with a rad-smashin' cool skateboard jump, the sky grew black with cacophonous thunder clouds! A massive bolt of wicked lightning streaked down from the sky, shattering the tower instantly! Kirby was thrown from the rubble into the air, and felt himself strangely grabbed by the lightning. The crackling electric hand that held him pulled the pink alien punk into the sky, and Kirby braced himself for the sick speed of this jam-shockin' ride. He flew higher until he arrived at an eldritch horror that took the form of a cloud with spikes on its surface, and an unblinking eyeball, filled with judgment and condemnation.

"So I guess you're ride-lightning sky guy?"

"I. AM. THE. OBSERVING. ONE. FOR. THE. FOWL. KING. I. WATCH ALL. YOU. HAVE. DONE. ALL. YOU WILL. DO. YOU. ARE. DOOMED. TO. FAIL."

The Observing One lashed out a second bolt of lightning directly at Kirby, but he had freed himself from the crumb-bum cloud creature's clutches. He jam-jumped his mondo-bad-board between floating space rocks, getting closer and closer to the cloud monster, but his opponent was ready for him! The Observing one shot a wave of his

spikes out toward Kirby, and the slick-twitch rad-cool alien skater smirked. It was exactly what he wanted him to do!

“I just came from the castle, but those knights couldn’t be *this* heavy metal!” Kirby shouted as he caught one of the spike missiles in his mouth, ground it between his teeth, and swallowed it, giving him bad ass spike powers! He threw himself toward the killer cloud and forced a hundred deadly needles to emerge through his skin. He collided with Observing One’s single eye, piercing it open! The monster screamed in agony, and it was just enough for Kirby escape the creature’s attacks. He high-jump air-Jordan space-jammed off the cloud creature, threw himself into a sick extreme body-bullet dive down, and whip-whizzed through the air toward the Earth, aiming his next awesome assault on all the ass-clowns at America.

Chapter 14

Sky-diving down to terminate his tubular terminal velocity, Kirby sky-boarded out some gnarly radical tricks like the Cyclone Pizza 360 Hut, and the Tornado Trap Mountain Flipped Double Dew. Traveling down, faster and faster, he was finally close enough to the Earth to see where he could land: the peak of a snow covered mountain! Kirby was pumped-up for trippin' it fast, because snowboarding was one of the most extremely cool things to do that were extreme and cool. He angled his board just right, and slammed forward into the ground, snow jibing out from behind his cross-rail wake 'tude. With mad slope-style speed, Kirby dashed down from the snowy peak, onto the lush green mid-section of the mountain. His altitude descended, but his attitude rose higher; Kirby could see the icy slopes tapering off, until one of them turned into a deadly waterfall! He also saw another gang of wheelies jumping tricks off the mountain, but these wheelies were different: they were rippin' BMX baddie wheelies! They noticed Kirby, and began to threateningly rev their engines.

"I got a river rip for some rapid raggin', boys! I think you dweebs should catch up with it, if you can!" The furious wheeled baddies chased after him, but Kirby was focusing on the real danger ahead: an abrupt precipice, and the river he was surfing down would drop off into a waterfall! Kirby crouched down low for the on-coming death-drop...

...and spazzed out the sickest surf moves with dead-ready speed! He surfed sickly down the gushing waves while the wheelie gang tricked out some toothpick hangovers to catch up with him, chasing him down after he had sick surfed on to the ground, landing on a strip of paved highway where he found himself surrounded by a second gang of wheelies. But something was different about these too. They had born-to-ride bulk on their metal

frames, and their engines revved deep and hearty with the rebel spirit of American freedom.

“Joke’s on you, kid! Our BMX brothers were rolling you through to us for a poundin’!” one of the Harley-hard wheelies said as the BMX wheelies caught up and further surrounded Kirby, but their sense of security was about as false as the notion that Pizza Hut is not the most perfect place for the best food ever off the chain, yo.

“Ram sickin’ down the dead one!” Kirby shouted as he flexed out his spike powers, shooting hundreds of needles in every direction and popping all the wheelies’ tires! As if those yesterday’s whatever monsters could get this bad boy! Kirby flipped up his board and saw that on the other side of the highway a cliff dropped down to the ocean. He took an extreme running jump and radically landed on the water to surf hard off the gnarly waves.

Chapter 15

Kirby surfed down the Pacific coast and smirked to himself with satisfaction at how perfect it all was. He may have left his far-off home world, but it was the 1990s. The most rad-rippin' decade for extreme-team-tubular tight titans such as himself, but no place on this world felt more like home, more like the 90s themselves than that land of Pizza Hut beach boardwalk kick-rippin' dreams of all who dreamed to the extreme...California.

California. The Last Great Bastion of All the Most Raditude! America's Skateboard. Home of LA hardcore punk and Bay Area thrash metal. California could wizard out the most wild-child sinner-twins of them all. San Leandro, Fresno, Orange Country, Pasadena, and all the rest couldn't be beat, even by a Texas-sized tanker of Mountain Dew. And it was here. It was his. It was radical.

Nobody was ready for Kirby's pinch-pitchin' slide down the line when he surfed on to the beach deep in the heart of Southern California. Ready for some bodacious Beverly Hills blastin', he skated out through the boardwalks and on to the streets. Kirby was feeling slippin' sick cool, and knew he had to find a good spot to show off his legit rad-tacular attitude. He realized the perfect spot: a high traffic, poppin' popular location for tourists: Disneyland. It would be an especially perfect location because of how otherwise lame everything would be: all the dumb old singing cartoon animals and stuff. Totally lame!

Kirby arrived on the doorstep of magic destiny, and was jammed up ready to roll-shock it on his mondo bad surfboard through the Pirates of the Caribbean, when he was confronted by two shockingly familiar faces: a pair of twins who resembled the long dead foe, Poppy Bro!

"So you made it to the turf on your lame-ass surf? I've got news for you cruise kid, 'cuz we'll knock off your

shoes!" one of the junior Poppy Bros rapped at Kirby.

"Yeah, damn straight, you're more than late! We heard you busted our big bro, so you'd better do the smart thing and go, 'cuz nobody can beat back our hammer-jam flow!" the other hip-hoppin' rap kid claimed. Kirby side-eyed both of them, and got ready to speak his mind.

"You're hippin' and hoppin', but are you street to the extreme? Nobody touches me for a shoot out, because bad kids wear black. A sand man in your head and a cowboy from Hell, I'm on it with heavy metal!" Kirby radically retorted. He could b-boy the bad-back track, but he knew that his loyalties must lie with the wailing wild guitars of the metal militias.

"Nah son, you and your crew is small, but no biggie. Your gnarly's notorious, and Compton wants you straight out!"

"Straight damn, bro! This punk better get packin' 'cuz it's your last green day!" Kirby gritted his teeth. Nobody got to front him with this kind of flip-trip! But before he could cross fire a flamin' bad comeback, he felt a voice speak in his head!

Your battle is not with your fellow youths, warrior. The Fowl King's power grows ever stronger, and time is short. Feel my presence in this land and travel to speak with me upon the coming battle.

He agreed that as sweet as it would be to tell off the these dork-trick-twits once and for all, he had bigger fish to fry.

"Settin' to jet, lame-os. Enjoy your kiddy kingdom!" Kirby sneered radically to the Poppy Bros as he threw down his skateboard and rip-rolled off to find the enigmatic Waddle Dee.

Chapter 16

Kirby stood in the burning, sun-baked badlands of Death Valley, his trusty skateboard leaning beside him on a lone cactus. He had boarded long and hard to this bodacious, bogus barren land in search of the majorly mysterious Waddle Dee, and, at last, he had found him. The grave mentor figure stood before his wayward pink alien ward, and, at last, there would be answers to all the questions.

"I have to admit, you've impressed me, warrior. You have begun to truly fulfill all the promise I saw in you from the first time we encountered one another."

"You haven't seen half the half-pipe jumpin' rock outs I've rolled down, dude."

"Perhaps not, but I can sense that you're more than ready to be properly tested." Waddle Dee threw a gleaming silver six-shooter towards Kirby. "Prove yourself to me in a duel, and I will reveal to you what you must know to complete your journey."

Kirby caught the gun flawlessly in the air like a total bad ass because he really was a totally cool bad ass. He starred down Waddle Dee for what seemed like decades. Finally, in the light-speed flash of an instant, their two gun barrels fired shots. The cracking explosion of gunpowder echoed through the air. Kirby and Waddle Dee stared at each other, guns drawn, barrels smoking. Waddle Dee's hand slowly rose to his shoulder. He felt the frayed edges and burnt fabric of his bad ass trench coat. He smiled with pride.

"Well done, warrior from another world. You have learned to harness your power with restraint and precision. You are more than ready to vanquish the evil that grips this planet's lands. Meta Knight and Fowl King still live, and they have roosted in the far northern lands. You must travel

swiftly, defeat them both, and finally destroy the evil magic that they wield."

Kirby smirked confidently at Waddle Dee's proclamations, and grabbed his board from the nearby cactus. "You don't have to tell me twice to double-trouble all these down-clowns!"

"Still using that board, boy?"

"You know that my rad won't stop for no bad, old man."

"I'll never fully understand your words, young warrior, but I will always trust your skills." Waddle Dee replied. Kirby smirked in appreciation, threw down his board, and skated forth to the extreme ultimate final battle.

Chapter 17

Kirby snowboarded hardcore across the frozen wasteland, occasionally encountering roaming packs of wacked out monsters, but he easily smashed through them, tricking major maxed-up speed off their dweeby bodies. He was cool as ice, and colder than killing just for the blood. Something deep in the deepest core of his hardcore attitude, made him feel that he was getting closer to Meta Knight. He snowboarded hard up the menacing mountain that lay before him, trick jumping up its slopes with sick skill and psycho speed. At the peak, at last, Kirby discovered the source of the strange psychic call: a gleaming black sword frozen in the ice, and behind it the eternally returning Meta Knight, now cloaked in smooth armors and a glorious purple cape with none of his trademark spikes or chains. Kirby thought that there might be something more than just the new threads that was different about his nemesis. "You're looking less than

extreme, nerd-knight! And your back looks like it's back on track, too!"

Meta Knight brandished a sword in response. "I am the alpha and omega of all of my being. I am Meta Knight Prime, existing across realities, and I challenge. Wield the Doomsday Sword, and prove yourself worthy!" Meta Knight pointed to the ice covered onyx blade, and black and purple bolts of energy surged forth from his fingers, shattering the frost that encased it. He then picked up the mighty sword, and threw it to Kirby, who caught it with a jump-kick trick off his snowboard, landing on his feet. The two fighters rushed toward each other, but only Kirby was the funky freshest, and after a few clashes of mighty blades, Kirby saw an opening! He spun a 360 slash, then plunged his blade through his fellow alien's armor.

"Call your cable provider, because I'm the shatter-star!" Kirby smirked to his defeated rival. But Meta Knight Prime began to laugh triumphantly in Kirby's face! What was this bogus dork-ness?

"The contract is broken! All death is now a fiction! We rise again! For the Fowl King, we all rise again!!" he roared as his body shone brightly, and finally exploded! Kirby was blown back, but did a radical recovery flip, and landed on his feet. The mountain peak was now dominated by an immense stone tower that wouldn't be standing for long.

Chapter 18

Kirby gripped the handle of the Doomsday Sword and burst through the immense tower's doors. Before him was a seemingly endless staircase, punctuated between flights by empty chambers. When he reached the first one, he was confronted by the original Poppy Bro! Somehow, killing Meta Knight Prime with the Doomsday Sword had brought many of strongest monsters Kirby had fought over his radical adventure back from the grave! There was no time to stall! He slashed through Poppy Bro again, tore Fire Pro to pieces, sliced Duke der Chronologos into mechanical mincemeat, and cleaved the comic book kid with cold cuts of killer combat. Further and further upward Kirby waged his bodacious battle, until he reached the very top of the tower. He confronted the Fowl King on his throne. This was it. All of his raditude was focused forward, and he was going to finally get a really sick quip in on the bird-brained baddie boss.

"Here's a bad blade to beat your bogus butt!" Kirby yelled as he lunged forward toward the deathly bird king. The Fowl King unfurled his wings, and began flapping back and forth, blowing huge winds toward Kirby to keep him back. The pink punk alien struggled against these gusts, using all his psycho sick strength to push forward. He inched along, barely making any progress, when suddenly the carrion crow god-king stopped flapping, opened his beak, and began to inhale mightily; the Fowl King was trying to suck up Kirby and eat him!

He tried his hardcore hardest to stop the mighty pull of the attack, but it was no use! Kirby was drawn closer and closer to the evil emperor! What was he going to do?

Your strength can live in death too, brave warrior.

The familiar voice of Waddle Dee came to Kirby with a cryptic message, and he had only a few minutes to make sense of it. It was a major gamble to the max, but Kirby had to try something. He let himself go limp, and was swallowed whole by the Fowl King! The avian overlord

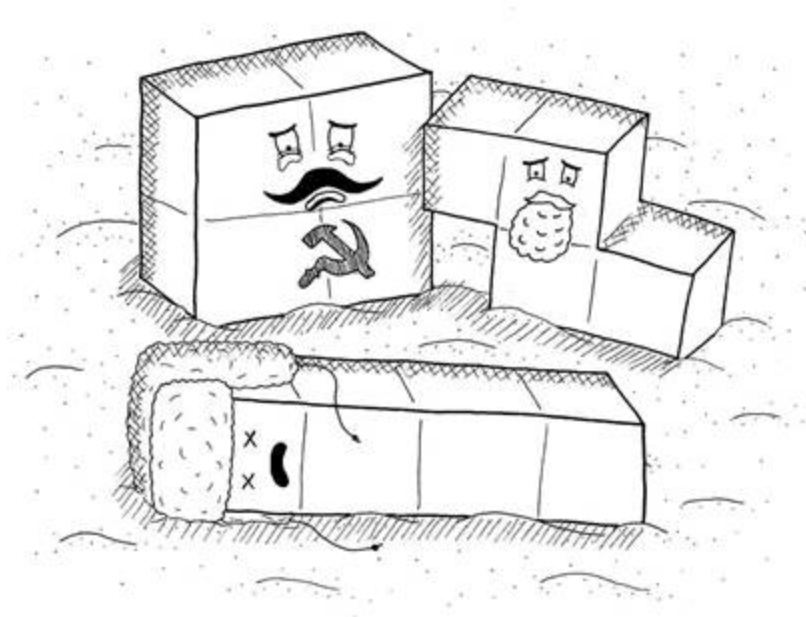
cackled with victorious triumph, but he cracked the laughs out way too soon, dude!

With sick true power to the absolute mighty max, Kirby's Doomsday Sword slashed through the Fowl King's belly, bursting forth from his mega-gross stomach, heroically yelling in defiance of all things that were not radical or awesome.

The Fowl King stared in horrified disbelief as his rotund form collapsed backwards, the viscera of his entrails spilling around him. Kirby held the Doomsday Sword up in tribute to his final, extremely radical victory. All at once the Doomsday Sword and the body of the Fowl King trembled, as sparkling arcs of purple and black energy bolts erupted from both!

The tower disintegrated beneath Kirby's feet, and, buoyed by the energies of the Doomsday Sword, he slowly descended back to the ground. The black night that had surrounded him was instantly turned to bright, clear day, and the Doomsday Sword, vibrating with immense energy, transformed in the blink of an eye into a cold, wicked cool bottle of Mountain Dew.

Kirby whipped off its cap and slammed down a serious chug. His radical awesome extreme journey had finally concluded. He was the coolest mean mad sewer shark to ever skate down a roughneck ride-out. Once more he threw down his skateboard, and pushed off to find a Pizza Hut.



TETRIS

by Philip J Reed

Chapter One

It was a beautiful day. It's always a beautiful day when I'm chained to a desk. Funny how it only rains when I need to be outside. Then again I can't complain. I always love a good joke.

I pored over the files on my desk. Shut my eyes. Squinted. Maybe when I opened them I'd find something I couldn't find before. But no. That never works. I should know. I've closed and opened these eyes many times in my forty-someodd years and never once did things get any clearer.

Just papers. Receipts. Report cards. Junior's history textbook with some abstract scribbling in the margins. The kid had promise. As long as what he was promising was to smear ink all over perfectly good textbooks.

The kid had been gone for three rainy days at this point. I combed the city. I found nothing. I stayed indoors and the sun came out. Big deal, right? Kids run away all the time. But there was a knot in my throat about the whole thing and damned if I couldn't swallow it. That's when I finally admitted to myself I needed help.

Fortunately help comes cheap these days. That's one good thing about bootleggers, they drive the price of the real stuff right down. I pulled the bottle out of the one desk drawer that still worked and took a big slug. That knot in my throat didn't go away but some other things sure did.

I closed my eyes to soften the blow to the bottom of my stomach and when I opened them, I wasn't alone.

"I...I'm sorry," she said. "You're...busy?"

"Don't look so surprised," I told her. "There's enough corruption in this city that even us lousy private eyes get to eat sometimes."

She heard me alright, but she was one of those women that always pretended like she didn't. I'd just met

her and I'm not the sturdiest plank in the stack, but even I could see that much. That meant she was really bad at hiding what she was, or really good at showing what she wasn't. She gestured vaguely at her faceplate. "You've got a little..."

I sure did. I wiped the dark stuff off my chin and told her to sit down.

"You look busy," she said. "I...I can come back."

"If there's one thing I know about women it's that they don't come back. Not the good ones anyway. Sit down."

She did. Cautiously. I know my office ain't exactly the Ritz-Carlton, but she sat down like even her ass was brand-name and my ratty chair had better take that as a honor. "Homework?" she asked, nodding at the textbook.

I slipped the papers back into the folder, slipped the folder back into a box. Dropped the textbook in after it. No sense being gentle with the shape that thing was in. "Just another day at the office. Missing child. Been gone three rainy days and one really nice one. Guess which days I was out there and which one I was in here."

"Should you be telling me this?" she said more than asked. "Is it not confidential?"

I shrugged for her. They like it when you put on a show. "So, what, I blab too much, give too much away, you run out and find the kid before me?"

"There's no need to be rude."

"You must be new in town."

She looked at me for a little while, like she was trying to come up with something that would hurt me. She found it, I could see that much in her eyes. But then she kept looking at me while she decided whether or not it would come out of her mouth. I waited and I looked back. Looking back wasn't half bad.

She was tall. Thin. Gorgeous. Absolutely perfect piece. Men waited lifetimes for a shape like hers to drop in.

Funny how they never did when you needed them most.

She stood up, giving me a nice view of that long, slender frame. Like I say, I didn't mind. She was making it real easy to be patient.

"I think we've gotten off to a poor start," she said, all smoke and apology. I still waited. She had a speech prepared and wanted me to turn it into dialogue. Bully for her, but I'm not much one for theatrics. "I," she said, eventually, "have reason to believe that my life is in danger. I can't go to the police. Don't look at me like that. It's only because I wouldn't have anything to show them."

I didn't look at her like anything. I've got a good poker faceplate. But it was part of her speech so I didn't correct her. "And what do you want from me?"

"You're a detective, aren't you?"

"That's what it says on the door, but I keep hoping it isn't true." She huffed a bit. Yeah, I knew her type pretty well. Spend more time practicing the huffs and puffs than the Ps and Qs. "Listen, doll, you can't go to the police because you've got a big stack of nothing to show them, which means you'd get a bigger stack of nothing in return. What makes you think it's any different here? I may not cash their paychecks but I sure as hell share their tendency to dislike wasting my time."

She thumped a wad of bills on my desk. Scattered dust everywhere. I was terribly embarrassed about that. I'd been meaning to dust but I prefer to do it later in the millennium. "Is that a waste of time?"

"Usually," I said.

She didn't like that, but I wasn't giving her a choice. She said, "You can call it a premonition. You can call it a load of hooey for all I care. But frankly I don't want to risk it. I have...I have feelings about things, sometimes. I've learned to trust them."

"What kind of feelings?"

She looked over at a row of books on the shelf, and spent a little time reading the titles. Only problem was there were no books on the shelf. I didn't even have the shelf. "Ever since I was young. I'd rather not get into it right now. Especially since I don't even know if you'll help me."

"Neither of us know if I'll help you, and I won't get any closer to giving you an answer until I know what we're talking about."

The phone rang. I have to admit, it gave me a start. I'm not a popular enough guy that I should have someone in the office and someone on the phone. I was starting to feel like a real celebrity.

I answered it. She didn't like that either, but if she wasn't going to tell me what she wanted I sure as hell wasn't going to feel bad about interrupting her not telling me.

That voice on the other end of the line gave me the first good news I'd had all day. "Well, doll," I said, standing up. I pulled my hat on, slipped into my shoulder holster, and guided her toward the door. "Duty calls. A scoundrel's work is never done."

"You're forcing me out?"

"You can stay if you want but I have to warn you my empty chair isn't much of a conversationalist."

"I have a job for you."

"So did someone else. But that phone call just let me know the work's been done for me."

She took a moment. I saw her faceplate light up. "The missing boy?"

"Yes ma'am," I said.

"They found him?"

"Sure did."

We were in the hallway now. I locked the door behind us. She told me her name. Irene Barre, apparently.

If that was supposed to mean something to me, I wasn't aware of it. I said nothing. She knew I had a kid to see.

Of course I didn't tell her where they found him. He was at the bottom of a pit near the old scrapyard with his breadbasket caved in. Hey, what do you know? Looks like I'd get to spend a sunny day outdoors after all.

I could feel the dirty looks she was giving me as I walked away, but I can't spend all day talking circles with some broad just because she looks nice. I may not always have things to do, but when I do, I make sure and do them.

That's how you make a name for yourself. At least that's what they keep saying. I don't know why that's such a concern. I've had a name since the day I was born.

I'm Tetris. Frank Tetris. And I was in for a bad day. The kind of bad day that lasted a week.

Chapter Two

I drove to the scene without making too much effort to hit the speed limit. There was no rush. Junior wasn't going anywhere. And the police were already on it. Usually that's as good a reason as any to drag your heels. They don't like witnesses while they disturb the crime scene and stomp all over the clues. I would have taken the scenic route, but there's nothing scenic about Tetramino City.

In a way, I guess I was lucky. They call people like me squares, and even if you don't know what it means you learn real fast that they don't think it's a good thing. There are a few of us here in Tetramino City. Mainly service workers. Bus drivers. People keeping the liquor stores in business. But most squares were driven off to Quad Corners, the kind of place that sounds real nice until you can't hear it anymore over the gunfire.

Quad Corners was to Tetramino City what Tetramino City was to The Capital. The slums of the slums. So I had the good fortune of being unwelcome even in a city full of unwelcomes. One thing's for sure, a life like that sharpens your corners damn fast.

I parked next to a squad car I recognized well. Too well. In fact I'm still trying to forget it. It was the car of Sergeant Columns, a bent copper if I ever saw one. I made my way to the bottom of the pit. It was a landfill, or it was going to be. Right now it was a very big grave for a very young child. It certainly wasn't going to be used as a landfill anytime soon, not with this circus set up down here. Tetramino City would just have to find some other place to put its garbage. Of course if it did there wouldn't be a city left.

"Make way, boys," called Sergeant Columns, looking over to make sure I heard him. "It's Detective Flatlander."

Flatlander was the previous generation's square. You didn't hear that one too much anymore. If you wanted to get called one of those you had to find someone with just the right balance of intolerance and ignorance. "Great to see you too, Chuck. What'd your boys find out?"

"Found out the strip joint your mother's in. She wants to know why you never call."

They thought that one was a real riot. Tickled them damned good. You've never seen policemen at work until you've seen them cracking each other up with a dead child about twelve feet away. "You got a great act, Chuck. You should take it on the road. Preferably right now, while I do some real work."

"You're investigating this?"

"The disappearance. Looks like it turned into something else."

"Hate to break to you, Tetris," he said, scratching his chestplate, "but the missing child case is closed. This is a matter for the geomicide department. No longer your job."

"That's fine. I'll do my investigating off the clock, then. Man's got to have a hobby."

There's some variation on this dog and pony show every time me and Columns run into each other. It's a little like sparring. There's a rhythm to it. Sometimes we even dust off old lines and give them another spin. But don't let the ritual fool you. Beneath all the good-natured ribbing, we really did hate each other's guts.

I wandered over to the kid. Junior Plank. Stiff as a board.

I looked around where he was laying. Tried to figure out in my head where he would have been before these clowns got their mitts on him.

"He hasn't been touched," Columns said, reading my mind. I'm pretty sure that's the only thing he ever read. I didn't see his S-shaped shadow creeping up on me. It was

the first in a long line of things I didn't see creeping up on me.

"Glad you taught these boys of yours to keep their hands to themselves. Maybe next you can work on their manners."

"I'm not sure why you feel the need to keep butting into our work, Tetris. I've got it covered, believe me, and there's no need for both of us."

"There's a lot of overlap in what we do, Columns," I admitted. "But the difference is I do it well."

He didn't like that too much, which was just fine by me. He left me with one cop so new they probably didn't have time to corrupt him yet. Columns and his misshapen crew were off to get some lunch. They'd been here all day. I gave the young cop a long enough look to let him know not to mess with me, and then I got to work.

It was Junior, alright. And for the first time in his worthless life that schmuck Columns was telling the truth. I could see that he was exactly where he landed. The dirt was disturbed just beneath him. Nowhere else. Just a perfect L, resting straight up, and supported by the high dirt wall behind him. The kid was pale. He'd probably been there all night. Maybe longer. It's not like Mr. and Mrs. Brown were in the habit of peeping into the landfill every night when they take Bipsy for a walk.

The trouble was, there wasn't much for me to see. The crushed faceplate wasn't nearly as bad as it had been made out to be, but I'm sure that wasn't much comfort to the dead. I climbed back out of the pit and made my way to the car. I couldn't see any signs of struggle where he must have been dropped. He was killed somewhere else. That was smart. There would have been clues, as there are in every geomicide. But we didn't know where they were, or where to start looking. Like I said. Smart.

I paused for a while. Why not? I can't say it was the happiest afternoon of my life or anything, but it was nice to

be alone in the silence for a while. The warm breeze rippled my trench coat. I looked out across the massive pit. I thought for a bit about how nice it would be to live someplace that wasn't always overflowing with garbage.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized it's good that I didn't. I would never get used to it.

Chapter Three

The next day I didn't much want to go to the office. I figured the dust bunnies could get along okay without me. Maybe it was Junior's box of stuff, sitting there. That stuff helped nothing. I helped nothing. If there was any kind of clue in there I guess I wasn't the guy to find it. So I pissed my morning away with a few slugs and a trip to the laundromat. All that sitting around waiting for a dryer worked up an appetite, so I swung into a Mexican greasy spoon called Pollo Pollo. The atmosphere wasn't great, but at least the food was terrible.

I slid into a booth. The sign said please wait to be seated. Didn't that sign know better than to try to be polite in this town?

The waitress came over. I knew her, but couldn't tell you her name. She'd probably say the same thing about me. She was a little dumpy. Wide-hipped. One of those little inverted-T shapes. I felt bad for her. Nobody could ever love that. I should know. Nobody could ever love this, either. Funny how few things in this world people could love.

I ordered a coffee and some toast, just to soak up some of that rotgut I was dumb enough to swallow earlier. I thought about ordering the chicken jubilee but didn't get that far. Making the little T look even worse for the wear, the tall I just came through the door. I passed on the chicken jubilee.

Irene walked around a bit. She wore the kinds of sunglasses people wear when they don't want other people to know where they're looking, but she didn't have enough sense not to turn her head while she did it. I didn't make it easy on her, but eventually she found me. She sat down.

"Sure, join me," I said. "We'll have a nice romantic breakfast together."

"It's four in the afternoon," she said.

"Too early for romance?"

She wasn't in the mood for games. At least, she wasn't in the mood for my games. She left the sunglasses on and lit a cigarette. She puffed a few times. The cigarette got to wear her lipstick.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

"Find you?" she said, as though repeating the punchline to an off-color joke. "I didn't find you. I came in for a meal, same as you."

"Sure," I said. "You came in for a meal. Dress up like you're going to the junior prom, or maybe a funeral slash singles mixer. Then come into a place that hasn't been cleaned since rags were invented. You can quit trying to fool me because I'm fool enough as it is."

She scrunched up her faceplate. I have to admit, I liked it better flat.

"Fine," she said. "I saw your car outside. I was on my way out for a meal. Is that a crime? I saw that you were here, and since you stormed out on me yesterday I thought I might try again to get my questions answered."

"You think you're going to die. Someone's going to off you, I guess. But you're the one with questions? What can I do with that? If you want any answers you're going to have to give me some first."

The waitress came back. She set down some coffee for me. No cream or sugar. No need to ask. She knew better. Same reason she wouldn't expect much of a tip. Irene got the once-over from her. "I'll just have a spinach salad and a glass of mineral water."

"She'll have the chicken jubilee," I said, before we were both thrown out on our ears. "If she doesn't eat it I'm sure I will."

The little T waddled off and I leaned in closer to Irene.

"You listen and listen good," I said. "I don't know where you're from and I don't imagine I'll find out without having to play some guessing game, but in this town you'd be smart not to draw attention to yourself. If you think these folks take kindly to anyone different from them, then you've got the wrong angle, sister."

"My angles are right," she said. "Same as yours."

She turned her head enough that I knew what she looked at. I kept stirring my coffee. I let her do some talking for a change.

"How long have you been married, Mr. Tetris?"

"Not as long as I've been divorced."

"But you still wear the ring?"

"Don't get excited," I told her. "It's all she left me with, so I figured I might as well wear the damned thing."

She smiled. I'm pretty sure she didn't even mean to. "You know what I think?" she asked.

"Sure, but I'll play along."

"I think you act like a big, tough private eye because you're really a little, soft man carrying a lot of pain."

"Good insight," I told her. "Now do the one about meeting a tall, dark stranger."

The chicken jubilee arrived just as the cops did. Of course. It was just my luck. I didn't feel like going to the office, so the office came to me. "Detective Flatlander," said Columns, slapping me on the backplate just as I tried to sip my coffee.

"Irene, I'd like you meet my good friend Chuck. He's a little slow but I give him a nickel to clean the gutters for me every summer. He manages to lose it before he makes it to the ice cream truck. But that's just part of his charm."

"Funny guy," Columns said. "Must be why you like him. Can't be for his looks."

"Joke's on you, Columns," I said. "Nobody likes me."

Turns out the good sergeant saw my car as well. I've got to learn to start covering that thing with leaves. He came in to see me, and let his pack of idiots loose as well. They were at another table in the back, playing grabass and spilling their icewaters. Tetramino's finest.

"You weren't at work today," Columns said to me. Irene didn't speak. She didn't eat, either. Probably because Columns stuck his dirty paw into her food the moment he sat down. I never did get my toast.

"You caught me. Tomorrow I'll bring in a doctor's note."

He waited. I heard one of his corners scraping anxiously across the floor. I knew that sound. "You haven't read the paper, either."

Yep. There was that knot in my throat. "I have not."

"It's the pit," Columns said.

"Another one?"

He nodded. He pulled a big envelope out of his vest, and then took a few snaps from it. He laid them on the table for me. They all showed the same thing, from slightly different angles, and in sharply different stages of focus.

"See, baby? I'm not the only one with a disregard for confidentiality. He just met you and he's already flashing his goodies."

"Oh, my heart," he said, making a grand show of grabbing at his chestplate. "You see this? I go out of my way to do my buddy Tetris a favor, and this is how he thanks me."

We were both trying to get a rise out of her. We didn't. But the pictures sure did.

"I'm sorry to break up the party, gentlemen," she said, climbing over Columns and out of the booth.

"I was just kidding with you," Columns said.

"That's very nice, but I'm afraid I don't want to spend my afternoon with people who could kid around

over...over that." She pointed at the pictures on the table. "I'd still like to speak with you. Alone. Mr. Tetris."

"You know where to find me."

"I will," she said. "If...I'm still around."

"Can it with the poor-me malarkey, okay? If you really thought someone was after you you'd be kilometers away by now, not rolling around town looking for Tetramino City's last leaf of spinach. If there's something you do want to discuss, you'll live long enough to do it."

I sure was a fount of things she didn't like very much. But that's okay with me. And Columns, too. And about every other male with a set of working eyes in the place. Because she turned to walk out, and you wouldn't think someone that tall and that thin and that rigid would have much of a tailplate. But brother, what she did have she knew how to use.

Columns gave me shit for another minute or two, but I think he was just buying himself more time with the chicken jubilee I apparently bought him. While he swallowed and bleated I took a closer look at the pictures. Not much to see, but Junior's body had been joined by another at the bottom of that pit. Funny coincidence, it was one of those little Ts. I say funny. Really it made the knot in my neck throb.

"You were just there?" I asked.

"I was."

"And you didn't touch a thing."

"Why do you always suspect me of tampering, Tetris?"

I scratched my chin and apologized. "Really, that was out of line. Forgive me. I spoke rashly based on all those times you tampered."

This second body had landed perfectly against the first. It was rotated sideways, the head of the T resting snugly against the leg of the L. It's a sad thing to see two

bodies in that state and get the feeling they were made to fit together like that.

The worst part was the blood. Junior was dinged up alright, but this guy had bled everywhere. Junior was immovable death. This guy was desperate gore. "Who is he?"

"How should I know?"

"Because you have his wallet."

Columns thought for a second about how to wriggle out of that one, but then he smiled and set down his fork. "You know me so well."

"Unfortunately I do. I'm also cursed with common sense. Tell your new kid that he needs to take all of his snaps either before you pull the wallet or after. Taking some up front and some later makes it too easy for us little guys to see what scumblocks you are."

Columns threw the wallet on the table. "He had six bucks. You want to be a boyscout I'll give it to you and you can hand it over to his widow. I'm sure it'd be a great comfort to her."

I was only half-listening. That was more than Columns deserved so I hope he was grateful. My attention was on the wallet. Or, rather, what was in it. Driver's license, of course. Name Harold Delaney. Picture no more or less awkward than any others I've seen. Organ donor. Not that anyone would want them now. Some credit cards. A condom he never used. Nothing sadder in the world than a condom that never gets unwrapped. I should know. I've got dozens.

No pictures of family, no receipts for diapers. None of that. There was a business card. Normally that wouldn't mean much. I carry a lot of cards myself. They're good reminders of who not to call.

But the name on this card was one I knew very well. Columns did, too. I showed it to him. It hit him harder than

anything had ever hit him in his life. In fact, he nearly stopped eating.

“Pay a visit to the good doctor?” Columns asked.

“Sure,” I said, slipping the card back into the wallet, and the wallet into my own coat pocket. “He’s going to be pretty sorry I skipped my apple today.”

Chapter Four

Dr. Mario was closer to Quad Corners than he was to the Capital. Good business decision. Even the biggest fool in the Capital would see through his phony accent and dime-store surgical smock. In Quad Corners, though, even the smartest of them couldn't afford anything else. Dr. Mario held the monopoly on the medicine game, and whatever was in those big, flashy pills of his, it kept people coming back for more. It was impossible to pay just one visit to Dr. Mario, and those visits could go on all night before you knew five minutes were gone.

I knocked a couple of times on the wooden plank he called a door. Nothing. It's possible he closed up early, but the knot in my throat disagreed. I was grateful for the first time in my life to have Columns with me. He kicked the door down with the kind of impunity you can only get when you pledge to uphold the law you're constantly breaking.

The office was dark. Too dark. This wasn't a slow day or an early closing. There wasn't a light in the place. Thick, dirty curtains held the sunlight back from climbing through the windows. Ever the gentleman Columns let it in with a sweep of his arm. I peeked into the window where the receptionist usually sat. She wasn't a sight I missed very much, believe me.

"What are you looking for?" Columns asked me, slapping me on the backplate.

"Anything," I told him. It was true. The filing cabinets were open and empty. There were a few cigarette butts on the carpet. A whole hell of a lot of shredded documents in the trash can. Wherever the good doctor went, he sure went there in a hurry.

Fortunately for us, he went no further than the storage room. A sound like a box of ping pong balls spilling

onto the floor put both Columns and I on edge. I drew my gun. He kicked the door down.

"Mama mia, you two," he said, emphasizing the vaguely Italian gibberish he probably picked up from Saturday morning cartoons. "You almost give me a heart attack."

I put my gun back in its holster, but not before I made sure he saw it. Columns stood still, facing Dr. Mario with his eyes on the yellow, blue and red pills that rolled around on the floor. There were hundreds of them if there were ten.

"Put some pants on, doc," I said. "You have company."

His eyes were big and crazed, and they rolled around in his head until he found a pair of pants, draped over the radiator. They were drying out. What was drying out of them was a question I was not about to ask.

"Taking inventory, paizan?"

"Yeah, yeah I need...for the end of the fiscal year..."

"It ain't the end of the fiscal year, doc."

"The medical fiscal year," he stammered, hopping on one leg, trying to wriggle into his wet pants. He took a tumble, but lucky for him his fat belly broke the fall. How anyone could think of this man as a doctor was beyond me. There was a rumor going around that the only real training he had was in plumbing. Now that I'd believe.

"Don't give us the goose and liver here, doc," I said, cutting through the nonsense. "We know you're skipping town. And in a couple of minutes you're going to tell us why."

"I am, am I?" he said, struggling to buckle his belt.

"Sure," I told him. "I'm not sure how we manage to convince you to open up, but I think it'll be a lot of fun finding out. How about you, Columns?"

"Come-a on, now," he said, laying the accent on thick, all pity-the-poor-immigrant like. I'd never pitied an

immigrant before and I certainly wasn't going to start with this jerk. "How-a many times I have to get hassled by-a you boys? I'm-a trying to run a clinic here. So many sick...I just-a want to help."

"Calm down there, doc. We just came by to give you the Polyominitarian of the Year award. You know, for all that selfless drug dealing you do."

He was on the ground, scooping loose pills into a big glass jug with his dirty gloves. "If you just-a come here to insult me, you can turn right back around and walk out. I have-a real patients I can help."

"You've got one less of them now," I said. That stopped him alright. His faceplate went pale.

"What you mean?"

"Harold Delaney." He took the driver's license. Flipped it over. I don't know what he expected to see on the back, but it wasn't there. He flipped it back to the front and returned it to me. "He had your card in his wallet. Now why is that, doc?"

"I don't care what you think. You won't-a listen to me anyway. I knew him. He was-a good man. Paid on time. Some-atimes he tell a joke. That's it. I don't-a know nothing else about him, and if you think it's a-me, Mario, that killed him, you could not-a be more wrong."

"Then why are you skipping out?" Columns asked.

"I'm-a not. Some-a, uh, problems with the lease. I'm-a taking a little time to myself. Until things...sort themselves out."

Columns opened his mouth to ask something else, but I held up a hand and silenced him.

"Leave him alone, Columns. He isn't skipping town. Even if he wanted to the guy can't afford a decent haircut or a second pair of pants. He wouldn't get far."

Columns wasn't a big fan of that, but it was too late. It was out and he couldn't exactly stuff the words back into

my mouth for me. Though if he could he'd make damned sure I gagged on them.

"Besides," I said, "we can't afford to burn bridges with an insightful guy like Dr. Mario. He could be just what we need if the trail goes cold."

Columns turned to me like I'd just started speaking in tongues. "The hell's your angle, Tetris?" Doc didn't look any less skeptical, or worried for my mental health. "Insightful?"

"Sure," I said. "Didn't you notice? Doc here figured out Delaney was murdered, when I didn't even mention he was dead."

Doc didn't do it. He knew more than he let on, but so did I. I figured I'd let him know who stacks the deck around here. We left him on his hands and knees. For all I know, he's still there.

Chapter Five

The next one dead was a cop. The young kid. The poor sucker never learned how to negligently photograph a crime scene. Now he was one. His name was Quarth. Not that it did me much good to know that now.

Like the other two, he was dropped into the ditch. If he wasn't dead when he fell he was dead when he landed. He was cold and motionless atop the other two bodies, his empty head snug in a perfect crevice between Junior Plank and Harold Delaney. Not an inch of space between them. I was starting to think these weren't random killings. These were victims chosen for their shapes.

"What's the matter, there, Tetris?" Columns asked. "You look green."

"Yeah, and you're going grey. What's it to you?"

We were at the bottom of the pit. Getting to know the area pretty well by now. A real home away from home. I could even make my way down without stumbling. Another ten or eleven corpses and I bet I could do it on my hands.

Columns didn't bite back. I was glad he didn't. I wasn't sure I had much bite in me either. Just a big knot in my throat that wasn't getting any smaller. Every day for the past three days there'd been a corpse. Now that it was one of his own boys, even Sgt. Hatred was worried.

He heard one of the other cops laugh. At least, I think he did. I didn't hear any laughter. Might have been quiet. Might have been nervous. Might have been in his head.

"You think this is funny?" he shouted. His faceplate went blood red. He leaned his broad shoulders into them. He might have been out of his mind. If he'd had one to be out of. "That's one of you over there. That could have been you. Maybe it should have been you. You think Quarth would be laughing at you in that pile?"

He paced around, spitting and radiating anger so hot I had to undo a couple buttons.

“You think this is a game?” he shouted, climbing over the yellow tape that was three days old and still fated to get a lot older. He pointed at the bodies. “Well I sure as shit hope not, because if I ever came across somebody who could look at this...this!...and see a game, I would pull him apart with my own two hands, and the world would be a better place for it.”

His stream of abuse dried up. Poor sap stood there with his mouth open, steam coming out of his ears but nothing left to say. He couldn't see me, but the boys could. Every few seconds one of them would shoot me the eye. The sarge's engine stalled, but they knew they couldn't just walk away for fear of fanning it back up again. They wanted me to do something. I thought that was really cute. The way they treated me earlier I'd sooner take a fork in the ear than pull any of their sorry potatoes out of the foil.

I lit a cigarette. I didn't want it. I just wanted the boys to know I was letting them stew. After a few puffs I took pity. “Come on, Columns. Let's get some food in that belly. I think hunger's making you batty.”

He turned to me, and the red faded from his face. I was braced for an improvised rant of my own based on some sleight only he perceived. I was surprised when he gave me something a lot softer instead. “I need to show you something.”

We climbed out of the pit and made our way to the cars. They were hot to the touch. Brutal heat today. It was a good thing they hadn't started using the landfill yet. The garbage would be sizzling, and this place would smell exactly as bad as the rest of Tetramino City.

“Here,” he said.

“You really are a creature of habit,” I told him. And why not? Sure, it was a kick in the pants, but did he really

find it necessary to steal the wallet of his own dead colleague?

"Judge if you've gotta judge. But look what's in it."

"Card from Doc Mario?" I guessed. But it wasn't a card. It unfolded into something much bigger than a card. It was a full sheet of paper, and on it was a picture of the dead cop. That's it. Just the cop's picture and one word. All caps. No punctuation, no explanation.

NEXT.

Sure was tough breathing through that knot in my throat, I can tell you that much. I folded the paper.

"The rest of the boys see this?" I asked.

"No," he told me. "Maybe I'm just paranoid, but whoever gave him this, or planted it on him...for all I know, it's one of them."

"Sure," I said. "But then why hide it? If it wasn't one of them, they'll be seeing it for the first time and you can work together. If it was, they know it's there anyway. The fact that you hide it or don't changes nothing. Certainly doesn't help the kid at the bottom of that hole."

Sgt. Columns leaned back against the car. It couldn't be comfortable. In fact, with the heat it was probably painful. But you wouldn't know it from the empty look on his faceplate.

"What happened to this city, Tetris?"

"Same thing that happens to every city, given enough time."

"I just...don't understand."

"You're in geomicide, Columns. You've seen this before. Three bodies? Shouldn't even register."

"That's the thing," he said. "It shouldn't."

He closed his eyes. I don't know when I expected him to open them, but whenever it was I was wrong.

"And yet," he continued, eyes still closed, "here we are."

I have to admit, I couldn't argue with that.

The sun held static in the sky. It blasted its heat directly downward, into the pit. Like a spotlight reminding the audience of what they should be paying attention to.

Even the good plays did that. They had to. Because any audience, anywhere, had to be full of idiots.

Chapter Six

I didn't go right home, and I sure as hell wasn't going to the office. It was times like this that I wished I had a friend. Lucky for me these times were a lot less frequent than the times I was glad I didn't.

The streets were quiet. It was too hot to go anywhere. So I went everywhere. Passed the old book shop, as I always do. Not sure why anyone needs fairy tales when there's enough to learn from the world around you. Thought about hitting the bar, but I couldn't risk it hitting me first. Passed Lumine's, that nightclub that just went up a year or so ago. Never had call to go inside. I hoped I never would. Kids danced around in that place to music that sounded like a whole lot of oil drums tumbling down the stairs. It was closed. Nobody would have been there in the daytime. Funny how stupid Lumine's looked when you could actually see what was going on.

I settled for a burger. I didn't eat it. I sat and stared at it and it stared back. Time passed. The sky got dark and I threw the burger away. It was the best conversation I'd had all week.

Rain. On a hot day like this you'd think it would be nice to get a little liquid cooldown, but Tetramino City's rain is more like grease. Comes down sharp and hard from the sky, sticks to your face, to your windows. Stains your clothes. It eventually makes it to the ground and sweeps whatever trash it can find straight into the bay. Old diapers. Soda cans. Granddad's pornography. Whatever trash was left out, it took. Tetramino City left a lot of trash out. Then it would get hot again, and that same water from the bay would start the process all over. Got dirtier each time. I wondered how long it be before the rain turned toxic. I wondered if anyone would even notice.

I drove to my apartment through the city of poison. Bags of chips. Some old pantyhose. A sales circular in about a thousand pieces. All of this sloshed around in the water my tires disturbed. All of this slid quietly down the storm drains.

Tetramino City was a hole. I liked to play a game sometimes. I'd open my apartment window, or my office window, or, hey, any window in the whole doggone city would do. I'd take a look at the view. And I'd think, what could I possibly change to make this city look worse? It's a great game. Very challenging. I've never made it past the first question.

My apartment was what they called an efficiency. That was much more polite than what I called it. I drove around in the rain trying to find a parking spot that wasn't torn to pieces or blocked up by some son of a bitch who thought he was entitled to two. As usual, I failed. That's another fun game I like to play. Can I Actually Park in the Spaces I'm Paying For? I'm thinking of releasing a home version.

Two blocks on foot, through the rain. I could feel my hat and coat yellowing. Some of the rain got in my eyes. It burned.

A few young hoods ran past me, making for shelter. Even the vandals in this trash-heap knew that Tetramino City's rain was the worst kind of jujumagumbo. They didn't even stop to call me a square. I'll have to remember to thank them.

The heat had been bad enough all day that the occupied buildings had their windows open. It let the greasy rain in, but it was that or be cooked alive. In my part of town there weren't many who could afford an air conditioner. The few that could couldn't afford one that worked.

I heard a few babies crying. Nobody answered. I heard a dog howling for food. Good luck with that one, pal.

I heard the clatter of a whole lot of couples fucking. Can't blame them. It's not like they could afford to do anything else.

The glass door to my building was really just the frame for a glass door. It had been smashed to bits before I even rented the place. The landlord said he'd have it fixed by April. I'd complain but he never said which April.

The hall carpets smelled like mold. They might have been mold. Even when I had the time to check I wasn't really interested in finding one other thing that was slowly killing me. Here and now I didn't have that time. My door was open.

Just what I needed. It had been such a boring week. I kept looking at that pile of corpses and wondering what it took to become one. This was a real treat.

I pulled my gun, quietly, holding my trench coat away from the holster so that I wouldn't make a sound. Then I inched closer to the door, listening. I had the gun raised in my right hand. If there was only one of them in there, I could easily get the jump. Two would be trickier, so I just had to hope that if there were two, at least one of them was stupid. Three or more and it was time to concentrate on taking as many out as I could before they took me out.

I took a deep breath and kicked the door. It swung inward, and not smoothly. Hopefully that top hinge gets fixed in April, too.

She said, "Long day at the office?"

It was Irene. She was in bed, with my nicest blanket wrapped around her. I could tell it was my nicest blanket because it still bent. "If you're cold," I told her, "you can close the window."

"I like the rain," she said. "I am cold, but I want to listen to it."

"You don't have the right acoustics in your own place or what?"

She rolled away from me. Faced the window. The bed was in my bedroom. My bedroom is what I called a small area of the carpet about two feet from the door and six inches from the window. "I did," she said into the rain, "what I needed to do."

That was fine. I wasn't really in the mood to argue a beautiful woman out of my bed. Not that I've ever been in the position to develop a taste for it. "Desperate times call for desperate measures," I agreed."

I could hear her breathing. "Do we live in desperate times?"

"Sure," I said. "Don't we always?"

Chapter Seven

The rain was just letting up as we finished. She kept the blanket pulled up to her chin. I don't know why. I'd already seen her breastplate. Maybe it was some leftover conservative bent from whatever past of hers I'll never know. Maybe she was just feeling some regret for letting a lowly square get flat with her in his dingy apartment. Who cared anyway? A plastic bag from somebody's takeout lunch flapped noisily in the drizzle.

I offered her a swig from the jug of hooch I keep on the nightstand. She didn't want it. I didn't either.

"Why are you so cold to me?" she asked.

"I'm cold to everybody," I said, scratching my cubic hair. "It's nothing personal."

She rolled over to face me. "Why are you cold to everybody?"

"This world doesn't give you a choice. You let people in, you end up at the bottom of a pit. You hold people back, you buy yourself some time before you end up at the bottom of a pit."

"Are you really as cynical as you sound?"

I rolled over to her. "What is it with you? You come all the way from God knows where, but it's obviously not here. You walk into my office with a little yarn about being marked for death, only you don't know anything about it. But I've seen what people look like when they know they're going to die, and they're not all doe eyes and finger twiddles. I say to hell with you and leave to do some real work, but you don't let it go. Fine. You follow me into a restaurant. Fine. You sit down with me and give me a mouthful of guff about not taking you seriously. So whatever it is, it sure as hell isn't death you're worried about, but it's something serious enough, or something you think is serious enough, that you can't let it go."

"I think you're being very rude," she said. I raised a hand.

"Hold on a minute. I'm not through. You've had days to say whatever you pleased. You didn't do it. Now it's my turn."

She puffed a little bit like I knew she would. If she didn't regret planing me before she sure as hell did now.

"So you get up and leave the restaurant when me and Columns start horsing off. Can't hold that against you. That's a damn rotten thing to do when a body's so warm. Only this time you're the one to get up and leave. Not me. I was happy to talk. That clinched it for me. I saw then how real fear of death made you feel. It was a lot different from whatever syrup you were spilling all over my office."

It would have been nice to see what was happening in her eyes, but she kept them closed.

"The bodies are still piling up. I don't like it. You keep turning up when I least expect you. I don't like that either. You also did a damn fine job of knowing what car I drive and where I live, even though I make a habit of sharing that information with nobody. So what do you say you finally start talking, and put both of our minds at ease?"

"Frank," she said.

"Talk."

She stood up. She looked around for a little bit and I thought she was trying to find her clothes in the dark, slipping away before I tried some non-verbal ways of making her talk. But she went down and came back up with two cigarettes and a match. She lit them both. I didn't want mine, but if it got her talking I was happy to hold it while it burned. After she blew a few drags out the window, she opened up.

"Are you religious, Mr. Tetris?"

"Not really. Took some classes as a kid. Grew out of it once I had a brain of my own."

She ignored me. I guess the question was rhetorical. "It's...you know the old sacred texts. I know they can seem a little silly now, but you do have to realize that it was written for a different time. A different...culture."

"My culture."

"That's right."

"It's a fairy tale. If you read that nonsense and it helps you live a better life, that's great. If it doesn't, that's fine by me too. But if it's giving you nightmares, sleep with the light on. It can't hurt you more than any other hogwash."

"I know it was before your time. It was well before mine, too. But I thought...as...as a..."

I helped her again. "As a square."

She blushed. Looked away, then looked right back. She wasn't doing much more with her cigarette than I was with mine. "Yes," she said. "I asked around. I wanted to find one with a...reputation. Someone who did a lot of thinking. Maybe not all pleasant thinking, but someone with the kind of mind that could solve problems."

"And because your problem is some mumbo jumbo you read in some scripture, you figured pitching me a murder was the better way to get my attention."

Now she really blushed. "I've felt guilty ever since."

"Wow," I said. "You're really not from Tetramino City."

"I hope you aren't angry."

"Why would I be angry? I still don't know what the hell you want from me. Tell me and then maybe I'll get angry."

"I know you're skeptical, but I was there. I know what I saw."

"You had a vision."

"My family was very religious. I was never a very spiritual person, but I'd been to church a few times. I know

the gists of the major stories. Seen the films on television. The point. The line."

"The sphere."

"It all sounds very fanciful, I know. Believe me. I was there once, too. But true or not, and I'm not arguing that it is true, it still makes an interesting point."

Now I did want some of that hooch. She still didn't. I helped myself.

"The idea," she said, "that a higher power could exist. Someone, or something...that can see us. That can perceive us. And yet, we can't perceive them. What would they see, Mr. Tetris? You live in this city. What would somebody see, staring down at us from some inconceivable angle?"

She blinked at me.

"What would you see?"

I told her it doesn't matter what I saw or what I thought. This whole thing might be a gas for some college students to sit around arguing about, but here in the real world daydreaming didn't do you a whole lot of good.

"But it wasn't a daydream," she said. "I saw it."

"What did you see, exactly?"

"Well," she said. Of course whatever it was it had to start with well. "I don't know exactly. That's...what I was hoping to talk to you about. You've...been around longer than I have. And as a...as a square..."

"You thought I'd have some insight. Sure. But I already shared it and it's not what you wanted to hear."

"Something was in that room with me, Mr. Tetris. I was in bed. Reading. And I saw it. Something big and pink. It wasn't there before. I climbed out of bed, and I touched it. I didn't want to, because I didn't know what it was. But I...I had to know I wasn't crazy."

"What did it feel like?"

"A...like a balloon stuffed with cotton, maybe. It was soft, but firm. Leathery. When I got closer, I saw that there

were hairs growing out of it.”

“Sure sounds like a daydream to me.”

“I know it does. But I touched it. And when I did, it jerked back, like it wasn’t expecting me. And then, just as quickly, it was gone.” She looked at the cigarette burning in her hand, like she forgot what she was supposed to do with it. “I believe it was a finger, Mr. Tetris.”

“The finger of God?”

“The finger of something. Maybe God. But something large. Many times larger than you, or even me. But also something on a completely different plane. One that we can’t even imagine.”

“You fell asleep reading the writings of that hallucinating square and had a vivid dream about it. That’s the story, sis.”

She shook her head. “There’s something out there.”

“That garbage was written a long time ago. Completely different world from where we are today. They’re worried about colors. I’m worried about pushers and pimps and kidnappers. Do you have any idea how far everything’s come since then? Those Flatlanders wouldn’t recognize us. That was before people even learned how to move along more than two axes. You pull somebody out from that time and stick them here and they’d drop dead of a heart attack. This all looks like witchcraft to them. This all looks like God. You’re living in the days of miracles. You don’t need creatures sticking their hands in from other dimensions for that. The miracle is all around you. It’s the miracle of a society in decay. The miracle of a world coming to regret that it got everything it ever asked for.”

“I didn’t know,” she said, “that there would really be death.”

I have to admit, that shut me up. I took another swig and held in my mouth, waiting for her to go on.

“I really did make that part up. I wanted your attention. But now I think it’s really happening.”

I swallowed. I did it slowly. I needed a little bit of time to get my words straight. "What's really happening here, Irene?"

"Can you take me to the pit?" she asked.

"If you tell me what you're hoping to see."

"I'm not hoping to see anything," she said. "I'm hoping you will."

Chapter Eight

Whatever she wanted me to see, I didn't want to stand in the cold rain figuring it out. Good for me, then, because when I finally got a chance to think about it, I had a roof over my head. Sure wish it wasn't the roof of a jail cell, though.

"Hey," I called to the cop standing guard. "What time's the continental breakfast?"

He didn't say anything. I didn't expect him to.

What happened at the pit threw both me and Irene off our games. She wanted me to see something. Then we both saw something we didn't expect to see. Another two bodies were on the pile. And just like the others there wasn't a gap between them. The corpses were slotted together perfectly. This wasn't chance. Whoever we were dealing with was a methodical son of a bitch.

"You didn't tell me there were more," she said. The oily drizzle came down. In the dark it was harder to climb down into the pit. The fact that most of the dirt was now mud didn't help either. Irene took a tumble. I tried to help her up and she pulled me down with her. Story of my life.

"I didn't know there were more," I said. "Okay. Tell me what you want to tell me and let's get out of here. Columns needs to see this."

"Doesn't he know?" she asked.

"I doubt it. They still have their wallets."

Irene was quiet. She took a few steps toward the stack. Five bodies. On top of each other. Next to each other. Between each other. Heads and legs and torsos and heads and legs and torsos, all fit together like the jigsaw from hell. I didn't know what she meant to get at, or how any of this tied into a vision she was sure she had, but that's not what bothered me. What bothered me was that work like this, work so cold, calculated, and anonymous, did a real

number on my understanding of the world I lived in. I've seen shit that would send even a thick-headed tank like Columns crying home to his mother. But this, whatever it was, was evidence that however bad I knew the world could be, there was a hell of a lot more that I didn't know. Didn't want to know. But had to know. I let the puzzle bobble around in my head for a while, and then Irene spoke.

"My first impulse," she said finally, "was to wonder why God Himself would be poking a finger into my bedroom. Was I chosen? For what? Why me?"

She shook her head. I watched her do it. Watched the dirty rain plaster her hair to her faceplate.

"That didn't last long. I've never been under any illusion that I have more to offer than anyone else. Certainly not more to offer God. And then I realized, He wasn't looking for me. In fact, He hadn't expected to find me there. When I touched Him, He pulled away."

"So...what? The Good Lord Almighty got lost playing Pin the Tailplate on the Donkey?"

"Whatever it was, it didn't expect me. That's all I'm saying. It had some...some purpose. And whatever it was, it didn't expect resistance. Even the mild kind of resistance we call curiosity."

"It didn't want you," I said.

"I don't know if it wanted anyone. At least, nobody specific. It wanted shapes. Body types."

"Now why," I asked her, "would it want body types?"

She extended her own finger, and indicated the wet, stinking pile of bodies stacked up against the wall of a landfill. "That's why."

And then, as we watched, another body fell. The sky was dark enough and the rain reflected enough moonlight that we couldn't make out a damned thing up at the rim of the pit, but we saw the falling body clearly enough.

It was what some of the ruder kids called a zigzag. The same body type as my great friend Sgt. Columns, only reversed. I didn't recognize him. Couldn't tell you his name. Not that it mattered, if what Irene said was true. This poor bastard was only a shape.

We stood, watching that body fall. We were transfixed. And then I had to look at her to make sure my mind wasn't playing tricks on me. She did the same, so I know that if we were hallucinating, we were at least hallucinating the same thing.

The body turned.

It didn't tumble. It didn't strike a stone and go careening off in another direction like some kid's misjudged marble.

No. It rotated, right where it was. It hung there. It rotated. And then it rotated back.

That knot in my throat was working overtime. Then the body moved. Horizontally. It kept falling, but it shifted all the way to the right. Then it moved slightly left. One last time it rotated, and at last it was wedged perfectly into the bodies that were already there.

"I don't know what I just saw, sister," I said, "but we've got to get out of here."

"Is it...?"

"Doll, I can't answer any questions that begin with 'is it' right now. Get the hell out of this pit while you still can."

I hustled her up the slope. You can imagine how that went. Mud, dark, incline, haste, you do the geometry. But we did get out, and aside from even more filth on our clothes and faceplates, we weren't too much worse for the wear.

At first I was surprised that I could see her so well. It was dark, then, in a flash, I saw just how much of a mess she was. I looked down and saw that I was no better. I

opened my mouth to ask her if she was alright, but it was Sgt. Columns' voice that I heard.

"Hands up, Tetris."

He was standing between two pairs of silhouettes. Also cops. Of course. The headlights from his squad car blinded me. "God dammit, Chuck," I growled. "You picked a good time to start up a game of cops and robbers, but you're playing it with the wrong guy. You've got fresh bodies down there, you dumb bastard."

He nodded toward me. One of his men came at me with handcuffs. I thought for a moment about fighting him off. I was sure I could do it. But somehow I didn't think that would help my case.

When my wrists were secure, Columns came over to me. "I know that. We didn't know where the killings were happening, but we definitely knew where the bodies ended up. So we figured we'd do a little stakeout, and what do you know. Frank Tetris."

He walked slowly in circles around me. He was damned proud of himself, that's for sure.

"It all fits together. Little boy disappears, turns up dead. Who's looking for him? Frank Tetris. Cop turns up dead. Who had just given him guff about his photography skills? Frank Tetris. Two new bodies dumped sometime today. Who takes his date on a romantic stroll to admire them? Frank Tetris. That's a whole lot of coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know. I have so many other things to say to you that I'm afraid I'd never get around to it."

"Take him away," he told his men.

They did. As the car pulled away I saw Irene. I couldn't make out much in the darkness but Columns was talking to her. That couldn't be a good thing, but I hoped for her sake that that was as bad as it got.

"Do me a favor, boys," I said to whatever two bozos he'd dispatched to haul me off to the hoosegow. "Tell your

boss there's three fresh bodies down there. Not two. We watched one slide down from the top. Tell him he could have seen it, too, as well as the actual murderer tossing him down, if he hadn't been busy staring at my tailplate, licking his chops."

They didn't say anything. I didn't expect them to.

So I spent that night in a cell. Could have been worse, I guess. There could have been more urine on the floor.

I didn't feel much like sleeping. I knew it would make the morning come sooner, but I didn't see any reason to think tomorrow was going to be any better than today.

I sat on the cot. It was almost as comfortable as a box of gravel. I let my mind wander. I thought, finally thought, about everything Irene had said. And about everything I had seen.

Was it really that strange? Her vision. If that's what it was. Finger of God poking into your bedroom, retracting in some direction you can't even fathom when you give it a tickle. I looked up at the ceiling of the cell. Yeah, it was strange alright. I certainly couldn't imagine a holy digit poking through there. But at the same time, what did I see in that pit?

I've never been much of a scholar. I don't think there's a point. The more time you spend with your nose in a book the less time you spend in the real world. But I know some rough truths of physics. What goes up must come down. Equal and opposite reactions. Any schoolboy could run circles around me if I had to tell you why any of that was true, but as long as I knew it that was enough for me.

What I saw in that pit, though, was not physics. That was something else entirely. That was some kind of law, or set of laws, that have no resemblance to any reality I knew.

Something falls. Fine. I've seen that before. But for that thing to rotate one way, and then rotate the other way, while falling, as though being acted upon by two completely different and yet unquestionably related forces, that was impossible. I saw it, and I still knew it was impossible. So what that meant was that I had just seen the impossible.

And to see it glide right, and then back left, and then tuck itself into, or be tucked into, position with the rest of the bodies? These aren't tricks of the light. Whatever they are, they make the holy pointer of God look like a visit from grandma.

It hit me then. The connection. The finger. And the bodies. Maybe it was the lack of sleep. Maybe it was the hooch and cigarette smoke and greasy mud that had made their way into me throughout the day. But whatever it was, my perspective shifted, and I saw it. I saw the bodies. I saw the falling shape. I saw it move and rotate and fit. It was all deliberate.

It wasn't easy to keep the vision in place. Perspective kept shifting back to my own, some poor putz in the rain at the bottom of a trash pit. But I could just about visualize it from another perspective. From a flat perspective. From a perspective in which this wasn't a world, but a kind of evolving riddle to be solved. A series of locks built of the same materials that would serve as the key. To you and I, those are bodies. To someone detached, and in control, those are objects.

I pictured it happening against flat black. Nothingness. Because nothing else mattered. Delaney wasn't a junkie. Quarth wasn't a new recruit. That latest body wasn't a husband, a father, or a son.

No.

With enough distance, they were only shapes.

I was only a shape.

Irene Barre was only a shape. That's what she was trying to tell me. Her vision didn't make her a prophet. It made her a tool. She might not have expected death when she sought me out originally, but once she knew what was happening, the pieces slid into place.

She understood. Hers was a rare shape. Too rare, if you ask me. And she was on borrowed time.

Whatever goal this otherworldly interloper had in mind, it seemed like he'd have to fit an awful lot of corpses together to accomplish it. Sooner or later, she would be one of them. Maybe even the most important one.

I had to find her.

Chapter Nine

I don't know if I was awake all night or if I dreamed that I was awake all night, but either way I was so exhausted that it took me at least a minute to realize that someone was passing me a meal through the slot in the door. I took it, but I didn't eat it. I called back that I needed to see Columns, but the son of a bitch just walked away.

Irene was in danger. Maybe not the danger she expected at first, but it was certainly a danger she expected now. She trusted me, for whatever reason, and I couldn't do a damned thing to help.

I paced. I called out for somebody to get their ass over here and listen to me. Hours passed. I kept seeing her faceplate-down in the mud. Dead. Another shape to be slipped into place. I yelled myself hoarse.

When somebody did finally come to the cell, it was Columns himself. He was unshaven, and it looked like he'd slept in his uniform. Seeing the state he was in made me acutely aware of how mine couldn't have been any better.

"It's about damned time," I told him.

He didn't answer me. He opened the cell door. I thought about giving him a knuckle to the cheesebox, but I didn't. Whatever he'd been through last night was clearly bad enough.

"What the hell's going on here, Columns?"

He took me by the elbow, not exactly roughly, and walked me into a small room. He flicked the light on. It was a broom closet. "I'm sorry," he said, softly.

"For what? For taking me into custody for murders you know damned well I didn't commit, locking me in a cell without a working commode, and leaving me to rot while an innocent woman is out there in that shitstorm without anyone to protect her? What's any of that between friends?"

"We can go into that later," he said. Even though there was a hell of a lot of "that" that he could have meant. "I said it last night and I stand by it...that's a lot of coincidence. I didn't really think you did it, but what was I supposed to do? You're a private eye. If you're snooping on your own and I need to throw a scare into you to find out what you know, sue me."

"You could have just asked, Columns."

"Absolutely. Fresh bodies tossed into a pit in the middle of the night, I see a guy climbing out of that pit covered in mud, he says he's innocent and I say fine? Sleep tight? This is a killing spree, Tetris. It's no time to put everybody on the honor system."

"So, what? Why are we in this closet?"

He handed me a sheet of paper. I didn't need to unfold it.

"This," I said. "This is a picture of you, isn't it?"

Columns nodded. He leaned against the wall. I figured I might as well confirm what I already knew. Sure enough, it was him. NEXT.

"When did you get this?"

"Last night," he said. "Sometime. It was there when I got home. And that's not all."

He closed his eyes.

"This," he said, putting forth genuine effort to make it through the sentence, "is happening everywhere."

"What? What's happening everywhere?"

His eyes were still closed. His color was fading. I grabbed him by the front of his uniform.

"Talk you son of a bitch. What's happening everywhere? What the hell is this, Columns?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Cities. Towns. People disappearing. Piling up. It's spreading fast."

"What's spreading fast? What is?"

His arm twitched. Barely. I think he meant to gesture toward something, then couldn't think of what it

should be. "Whatever this is. Whatever's happening here, it's catching on."

This was bad news. If this kind of thing was happening all over the world, bodies being slotted together as some sick fuck's idea of sport, then this was even worse than I thought. I pushed him aside and scrambled out the door. I shouldn't have done it, but Columns is a thick guy. He had a gun. He had training. That didn't mean he'd stand a hamster's chance in a microwave, but it certainly gave him a better shot than Irene had.

One of the boys tried to stop me as I ran out of the station. I said, "One way or another, I'm getting through that door. Either that's because I knock your block off or because you decide to do the smart thing and help Columns out of that broom closet."

He thought about that one for all of half a second. I called after him to keep an eye on the guy. A good eye. Eyes round the clock.

Columns was a real piece of shit. But even real pieces of shit deserve some respect. After all, they've had to watch this civilization crumble. Same as everyone else.

Chapter Ten

I went home. She wasn't there. I stopped by Pollo Pollo. She wasn't there either. I asked for a coffee to go. They took too long making it, so I left. I thought about letting them know. Letting all of them know. But even if they believed me, what could they do?

Hell, what could I do?

It was pretty good luck that I found her at my office, because that was the last place I could even guess to look. She was behind my desk. She had a cigarette going, and Junior Plank's history book was open in front of her.

"He knew," she said.

"Knew what?"

"As much as us, I guess."

"A whole lot of nothing," I said. "And not enough to keep anybody alive."

The book was open to a page about that loopy old square's writings. The ones Irene and I had discussed last night. One day something's sacred, the next it merits a page in some kid's textbook, if it's lucky. From strict doctrine to multiple choice question. It might be a better fate to be forgotten entirely than to end up trivialized.

The lines in the margin that meant nothing to me then meant a lot more to me now. Junior was working something out in his head, trying to bring it into the light and maybe get some kind of handle on it. These weren't empty-headed doodles. These were bodies.

"Let's go," I told her. "We're getting out of here."

"You've had a vision, too."

"Sure," I said. "Forces beyond our control, whatever they are. We can't fight them. We can't even escape them."

She stubbed her cigarette out on my desk. Who cared? Neither of us would ever see it again. "Then why run?"

“Because if I’m going to die, sister, I’m not doing it in this shithole. And you ain’t either.”

I pulled a suitcase out of the closet. I had it pre-packed for emergencies. There wasn’t much in there. A few shirts, clean sport-jacket. Pair of pants I may or may not have outgirthed by now. Some cash. A bottle of the only friend I’ve ever had. And a filthy foreign porno mag called Zoop. A little embarrassing, but I never imagined I’d be with anybody when I opened it up.

“Get your coat,” I said.

She did. I watched her wriggle into it. I wondered how long she had left. I wondered how long I had left. “It’s me. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, baby. But whatever he’s doing, he doesn’t have a long tall Sally like you yet. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s saving a place of honor.”

She said she was scared. I said that was good, because it meant she still had a future to be worried about.

We got in the car and drove. We didn’t say anything. We had to pass the pit. The mass grave. There were people standing around it now. Lots of them. The cops tried to hold them back. Reporters tried to push through. Columns wasn’t there. At least not that I saw. I started to miss him, for some lame-brained reason I’ll never figure out.

She didn’t ask where we were going. Maybe it’s because she thought it didn’t matter. I felt exactly the opposite.

On the way I stopped for gas. Told the kid to fill the tank. Finally got myself that cup of coffee while we were there. I got her one too. She didn’t drink it. That was fine. If she’d rather sleep I couldn’t blame her.

She passed out after another hour. I didn’t turn the radio on. For starters I didn’t want to wake her up. More importantly I didn’t want to hear what any of those clowns on the airwaves had to say about it. The last thing any man

should have to endure at the end of the world was a pack of morons trying to tell him what it all meant.

We got there well after sunset. It was dark. She didn't wake up and I didn't wake her. I set the car in park, shut off the engine, and covered her up with my coat. I reclined in my seat and caught some shut-eye myself. Or maybe it caught me. Either way, I wasn't tossing and turning for long. My mind shut down and that was aces by me.

It was her hand that woke me. Her hand on my arm. I don't know what time it was. The sun was up. I'd guess around ten, but time loses a lot of meaning when every hour might as well be your last.

She saw me open my eyes. "Where are we?"

"Nowhere," I said. "And I really hope you like it."

We got out of the car and walked along the beach. The sand was clean and white. There were no roads. No houses. No businesses. No companies. No sounds but the sounds of the tides and the gulls.

The sky was a lighter blue than I remembered it being. The beach was longer. Wider.

This was it. I sat down in the sand. It was warm. It was comforting. She sat down next to me.

"There's nothing around for miles," I told her. "I always figured they'd eventually get around to developing the place, but I doubt there's time now."

She agreed without saying or doing anything.

"This is it. The last unspoiled place in the whole damned world as far as I'm concerned."

The tides rolled. She watched them like she was watching a baby being born. I wondered if she'd ever seen tides before. At least tides that didn't carry needles and old sweaters onto shore.

"Want to know how I found this place?"

She said, "No."

I understood completely.

I'd picked up a few candy bars at the gas station. I passed her one. We ate quietly, listening to the waves. It was pretty peaceful. You'd never even know the world was ending.

Well into the afternoon we sat on that beach. At one point the sky clouded over and we got a little bit of rain. Sun showers, they called them. Or they used to.

We sat in the rain. It was gentle rain. Soft and refreshing. Clean. Some of it got in my eyes. It helped me see more clearly.

She said, "It's beautiful."

And she was right. That's exactly what it was.

More time passed. It got to be late afternoon. We'd spent the entire day on that beach. Barely talking, but breathing a hell of a lot of fresh air. And then she asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about whoever or whatever is doing all this. Or all that. Who's taking the things that define life in this world, and rearranging them. Organizing them. Fixing them."

She waited for me to get my thoughts together.

"This whole world's gone to pot. Tetramino City was worst than most, but noplac really has room to talk. Violence. Hatred. Stupidity. We poison our own water. We complain if the schools try too hard to teach the kids. We let ourselves get sorted by shape and by income. Why? Isn't this our world?"

"It is."

"It was. And that's what we did with it. Let it all fall apart so that we'd always have something to be miserable about."

She laid her head in my lap. "What do you think he's like?" she asked me. "The one...doing all of this."

"Been thinking about that one too. And you know what, doll?"

"What?"

"I don't have an answer. But whoever he is, he's taking our world apart, piece by piece, and he's fitting it snugly and perfectly into a landfill, where it belongs. He knows it's beyond salvation."

She looked up at me. Doe eyes. Real ones this time. "What about this, though?"

"What about what?"

"What about this beach?" she asked. "The water. This sand."

"This quiet."

She let herself hear nothing for a while. "Yes. The quiet. Isn't this worth saving?"

But I'd already thought about that, too. "Sure, baby. To you and me. But look at where we came from. Look at what we left."

She closed her eyes. I waited until she opened them again. It took a while, but that was okay.

"To you and me this looks pretty swell. But that's perspective for you."

I swallowed. It was easy. The knot in my throat was gone.

"To us, this is heaven. But to him out there, whoever's controlling this, it probably doesn't even register. It's all just another piece of junk, and I'm okay with that."

"Why are you okay with that?" she asked me. She wanted to know how she could be okay with that too.

"I'm okay with that," I said, "because if something this beautiful to us can be nothing to him, imagine what a perfect world he must live in."

She took a deep breath. Let it out slow. "That's true," she said.

"Really. Imagine it."

And that's where we stayed, secure in the knowledge that whoever was rearranging our world with his own unfathomable motives was coming from a place

much better than we were. Neither Irene nor I were happy that it would take so many seemingly senseless deaths for all of this to work out, but at least ours we'd die in the only part of the world we'd be sorry to lose.

And maybe one day we'd meet again, she and I.

It wouldn't be this world. Not exactly.

It would be an organized world. A world of structure. A world without gaps. A world without discord. A world without loose pieces of garbage.

A world to mirror the perfect world of our benefactor.

We deferred to his wisdom.

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